

The Making of a Forefather

ABRAHAM IN ISLAMIC AND
JEWISH EXEGETICAL NARRATIVES



BY

SHARI L. LOWIN

THE MAKING OF A FOREFATHER

ISLAMIC HISTORY AND CIVILIZATION

STUDIES AND TEXTS

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AND
ROTRAUD WIELANDT

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Jewish Exegetical Narratives*

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*To The Two Men Who Inspired My Love For The Forefather Abraham
My Grandfathers*

*Abraham Wadler
and
Abraham Lowin*

*May their memories be a blessing
May this honor their memories*

If you wish to come to know Him who spoke and the world came into being, study *haggadah* (*aggadah*), for thereby you will come to know Him and cling to His ways.

—*Sifre*, Deuteronomy, *piska* 49 (c. 3rd–4th cent. CE)¹

Of course I believe in Free Will. I have no choice.

—attributed to I. B. Singer (1904–1991)

¹ *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, trans. and ed. Reuven Hammer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986).

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TRANSLITERATIONS AND NOTATIONS

The transliteration of Arabic words follows the style of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new edition, with a modification in the case of the letter *ج* (*jīm*), which appears as “j” rather than “dj,” in accordance with current scholarly practice.

The transliteration of Hebrew words follows the style set in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. The style of the transliteration of titles (namely, the capitalization of title words) follows common scholarly practice.

As much as possible, formatting of the subject headings, the footnotes, and the bibliography follows the guidelines set forth in Kate Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 5th edition.

The following system of annotation has been employed:

- a. References to al-Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh al-rusūl wa-l-mulūk* consist of two numbers. The first refers to the edition cited in the bibliography, edited by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-ma‘ārif, 1961(?)–1977). This number is followed by the page number of E. J. Brill’s Leiden edition (1879–1901), in order to allow for more universal tracking.
- b. References to Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* likewise consist of two numbers. The first refers to the reprinted William Whiston edition, published by Hendrickson Publishers in 1987. The second number refers to the critical edition put out by Harvard University Press (1926–1965) under the title *Jewish Antiquities* in the series *Josephus*.

ABBREVIATIONS

AJSR	Association for Jewish Studies Review
BSOAS	Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
BT	Babylonian Talmud
CCAR	Central Conference of American Rabbis
EI ²	New Encyclopedia of Islam
EJ	Encyclopedia Judaica
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
IOS	Israel Oriental Society
IJMES	International Journal of Middle East Studies
JAAR	Journal of the American Academy of Religion
JANES	Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
JJS	Journal of Jewish Studies
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JSAI	Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam
JSS	Journal of Semitic Studies

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No matter how it may seem in the dark hours of the pre-dawn morning, when one sits before a glowing computer screen, with only caffeine for company, no work is the product of just one person. Without the continuing advice, help, and encouragement from a most appreciated group of people, this project could not have been completed.

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INTRODUCTION

The unique stories a people tells about its ancestors often hold the key to understanding who and what that people understands itself to be. Through their stories, groups relate not only the facts of their history but also their values, the nature of their relationship to each other, to those around them, to their God. One nation tells of an ancestor born of humble beginnings, in a log cabin, who rose to prominence as the leader of the nation, victor of a civil war, restorer of national unity, and abolitionist of slavery. Not surprisingly, this is the very same nation that sees itself as the epitome of democracy and honesty, committed to the principles of equality and the right of self-determination, the “land of the free and home of the brave.” Another society tells of a founding father, a prince, who rejected his royal stature and riches in favor of ascetic wandering and contemplation. It is the same society whose core value places the virtuousness of the spiritual life over the material world.

Where the Islamic and Jewish stories of the founding forefathers are concerned however, academic scholarship has largely ignored this significant aspect of the source material. Instead, in comparative studies of Islamic and Jewish exegetical narratives (*hadīth* and *midrash aggadah*, respectively) on scriptural figures in general, scholars like Abraham Katsh, Julian Obermann, Richard Bell, and even S. D. Goitein¹ have often looked only fleetingly at the themes embedded in the texts. Instead, they dwell all too frequently on determining the primacy of one tradition over another. Such scholarship, while valuable in one aspect, misunderstands the very complex and often symbiotic relationship between Islam and Judaism and ignores the intrinsic creativity of both. Furthermore, such an approach denies the narratives themselves a large part of their inherent worth as entities that supply spiritual meaning to the lives of their adherents.

The case of the forefather Abraham ranks as especially significant in the problematics of this conversation. After all, he plays a pivotal

¹ For a more in-depth discussion of these sources, see the *Excursus* at the end of this chapter.

role in both Judaism and Islam: despite their vying for the same sacred history, both Muslims and Jews trace the genesis of their biological as well as spiritual communities back to him. In other words, while they understand themselves to be two different societies and religions, Islam and Judaism share the very same founding father. More importantly, although the Jewish and Muslim scriptures themselves provide relatively little information about the early life of the man, the extra-Scriptural exegetical literature of *both* tell the very same stories about him and his development into God's beloved. Yet Islam is not Judaism, Muslims are not Jews, and vice versa. Rather, the two traditions remain distinct entities with distinct value systems. In the search for the absolute "original," Western academic scholarship thus largely ignores the exegetical narratives' clues for what it means to each culture to be Muslim or Jew.

The current study aims at filling in these gaps through a re-examination of the Islamic and Jewish versions of the early biography of the forefather Abraham, from his birth through his miraculous escape from the flames of the Chaldean furnace, i.e. the years leading up to his election as God's chosen. The purpose of such an investigation is two-fold. On the one hand, the present approach to the material challenges the all too frequent scholarly insistence that artifacts appearing in both the Jewish and Islamic contexts result *ipso facto* from Islam's dependence upon its elder brother. Instead, the present analysis demonstrates the *mutual interdependence* of the Jewish and Islamic corpora in creating these narratives; just as Islam undeniably took from Judaism, so it gave back to the midrashic corpus. In the case of Abraham, the Muslim and Jewish accounts are so intertwined, each influencing the other, that in charting the development of their motifs one can not treat them as truly separate entities. In other words, in order to understand fully the development of the Islamic accounts of the early life of Ibrāhīm, one must be familiar with the pre-Islamic midrashic sources. Conversely, in order for one to comprehend thoroughly the evolution of those Abrahamic midrashic accounts compiled after the development of Islam, one must attain knowledge of the Islamic texts.

The second objective aims at examining *how* the two traditions used those Abrahamic elements they adopted from one another. After all, Islam and Judaism did not simply copy from each other; had they done so, the differences between Islam and Judaism would be only marginal, which they obviously are not. More accurately, the

two religious traditions used shared information while creating vastly differing conceptualizations of their common forefather. The analysis here will dispute the folklorist Haim Schwarzbaum's statement that:

All students of the Quran have failed to realize that Muḥammad's deviations from the biblical pattern or from the biblical text would seem quite natural and even reasonable to anyone who has even a moderate acquaintance with the basic laws of oral storytelling, as well as of oral transmission and diffusion of tales. Muḥammad's Jewish and Christian informants did not stick to any fixed written literary text. They behaved in the same way as all storytellers do since time immemorial: they tell stories in a free, spontaneous manner.²

Unlike Schwarzbaum, I argue here that Islam and Judaism *purposely* and *purposefully* manipulated and adjusted the texts of the other in order to emphasize their own unique religious values. In so doing, the traditions provided their adherents with material for religious self-perception and for defining themselves as entities distinct and separate from one another, despite their almost identical biological and spiritual heritage.

The particular theological/philosophical issue around which the early Abrahamic accounts orbit is one of the most important and simultaneously complex issues facing religious systems: human free-will vs. divine predestination. For religions which emphasize the omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence of the Deity, as Islam and Judaism do, the possible existence of human free-will poses no small problem. If God knows all, and controls all, it logically follows that our every move, thought, and feeling is orchestrated from above. This brings up the obvious existential questions: if we are but puppets in the hands of the Divine, why did He bother with our creation? Furthermore, what use are the religious laws, rewards and punishments of orthoprax religions? How can God penalize and recompense one who has no control over one's actions? To do so strikes the mind as patently unjust, especially problematic for systems which insist on God's justice and righteousness. Yet, if, in order to allow for human freedom to choose to sin or not, one denies God ultimate and complete control of the universe and all that it contains,

² Haim Schwarzbaum, *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends in Islamic Folk Literature* (Walldorf-Hessen: Verlag für Orientkunde Dr. H. Vorndran, 1982), 12.

one diminishes both His power and the force of His demand to be recognized and worshiped. For Islam and Judaism, there could be no more appropriate figure to whom to turn for instruction on this matter than the man who laid the groundwork for each tradition and thereby the values they contain: Abraham.

Definition and Nature of Midrash

The corpus of Jewish texts from which this project draws is known collectively as “*midrash aggadah*,” or *midrash*, for short here. This expression indicates both individual narratives (pl. *midrashim*) or pieces of exegesis as well as entire books, and even a literary type, dating roughly from 400 CE to 1200 CE.³ The Hebrew word *midrash* derives from the root שׁרֵשׁ (*drš*) meaning to seek, consult, or inquire.⁴ Scholars have struggled to pin down a less literal yet more accurate definition of the term, one that would cover all aspects of the large corpus included under the midrashic rubric. So complicated is the issue that Joseph Heinemann, one of the premier writers on midrash, defined *midrash aggadah* by describing what it is *not* rather than what it is. According to Heinemann, *midrash aggadah* is that multifaceted material found in the Talmudic-Midrashic literature that does not fall into the category of Jewish law (thus distinguishing it from *midrash halakha*, legal midrash).⁵ Renee Bloch provides a more positive yet equally vague definition; she writes that the word designates exegesis which “moves beyond the literal in order to penetrate into the spirit of Scripture,” to draw interpretations which are not always immediately obvious.⁶ Others have seen fit to define the term not as

³ For an overview analysis of the different types and periods of *midrash aggadah* and a table diagrammed accordingly, see *EJ* (New York: Ktav, 1972), s.v. “Midrash,” by Moshe D. Herr (11:1507–14).

⁴ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, new ed., (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1906; reprint, Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson Press, [1966]), 205.

⁵ See Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadot ve-Toledoteihen* [Aggadah and Its’ Development] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), chapter one. An English translation of this chapter, by Marc Bregman, appears as Joseph Heinemann’s “The Nature of Aggadah,” in *Midrash and Literature*, eds. G. Hartman and S. Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 41–57.

⁶ Renee Block, “Midrash,” in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism-Theory and Practice*, ed. William Scott Green (Montana: Scholars Press, 1978), 1:31.

a literary genre but as a particular action. According to David Stern, midrash connotes an activity of biblical interpretation as practiced by the sages of early rabbinic Judaism in late antiquity and recorded in the Talmud and midrash collections.⁷ Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch state similarly that midrash is “a mode of approaching the text,” one derived from “a religious world view and motivated by various needs which enables and encourages multiple and even contradicting meanings to be discovered in the texts.” The essence of midrash, they explain, lies not in the *form* of expression but in the *content* it lays bare in a text. Midrash, the “shadow of Scripture,” came into being the very moment a certain text was treated as Scripture. Rabbinic midrash is but the intensification and development of this process.⁸ Daniel Boyarin echoes Shinan and Zakovitch, saying that one will never read midrash well unless one understands it first and foremost as reading, as hermeneutic, “generated by the interaction of rabbinic leaders with a heterogeneous and difficult text which was for them both normative and divine in origin.”⁹

Perhaps the most accessible and helpful explanation of midrash appears in the work of James Kugel, who suggests that the word might best be translated simply as “research.” Like Stern, Shinan, and Zakovitch, Kugel does not view the term as expressing a particular literary genre. Instead, Kugel maintains that midrash constitutes an interpretive stance, a way of reading the sacred text that can be found in almost all of what constitutes classical, and much of medieval, Jewish writing. The precise focus of this stance, writes Kugel, are the textual surface irregularities over which midrash builds a smoothing mound. Or, as Kugel poetically explains, the text’s irregularity is the grain of sand which so irritates the midrashic oyster [i.e. the rabbinic sage] that he constructs a pearl around it. Soon enough, pearls being prized, midrashists begin searching out irritations and irregularities.¹⁰ Moreover, Kugel explains, because midrash

⁷ David Stern, “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Autumn, 1988): 132.

⁸ Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch, “Midrash on Scripture and Midrash within Scripture” in *Studies in Bible*, Scripta Hierosolymitana, ed. Sara Japhet, v. 31 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), 255–277.

⁹ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 5.

¹⁰ James L. Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 145.

consists of the exegesis of individual biblical verses, not books, each verse is as connected to its most distant fellow as to the one next door, which is how the rabbis understood Scripture to relate to itself. This results in midrashic interpretations drawing references and explanations of the irregularities from often far-flung and remote contexts and authors.¹¹ Since the rabbinic mind understands divine words as existing independent of circumstance, exegesis thus becomes part of the text itself; whatever hidden meaning one is able to reveal through “searching” simply is already *there*, part of the divine plan.¹² In this, Kugel reflects a late third-fourth century rabbinic teaching which states, “If you wish to come to know Him Who spoke and the world came into being, study *haggadah* (*aggadah*), for thereby you will come to know the Holy One, Blessed Be He, and cling to His ways.”¹³

Midrash aggadah accounts then do not constitute simply narratives of entertainment and fantasy but are both exegetical *and/or* homiletical in nature, created by the rabbis to explain the difficulties, philosophical as well as conceptual, of the biblical narrative. Midrash is a rabbinic reading of what the ancient rabbis perceived to be the “plain sense of things,” generated by their interaction with a complex and often secretive and puzzling text in an attempt to render it more comprehensible. As such, any element entering into these stories should contribute either to the exegesis of the biblical material at hand or to a homiletical point. Those elements added later that do not have exegetical or homiletical value stand as red flags hinting at possible external influence. These components will draw our specific attention in our close reading of the midrashic Abraham narratives.

Another poetic description comes from Samuel A. Berman in his introduction to *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: an English translation of Genesis and Exodus according to the printed version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an introduction, notes, and indexes* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing, 1996). Berman writes that midrash is “the hammer that awakens the slumbering sparks on the anvil of the Bible” (p. ix). This appears to be a play on the rabbinic exegesis of Jer. 23:29 in *BT Sanhedrin* 34a. See *Babylonian Talmud* (Vilna: Ram Publishers, 1927).

¹¹ Kugel states that any midrashic work is by definition a gathering together of different bits of exegesis created by different authors, often in different times and historical circumstances. See his *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 34.

¹² Kugel, “Two Introductions,” 133. Similarly, Boyarin (pp. 18–19), claims that midrash is the “true reading” of the meaning of the biblical text, the plain sense of things.

¹³ *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, trans. and ed. Reuven Hammer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), *piska* 49.

*Definition, Nature, and History of the *Isrā’īliyyāt**

Although the extra-Scriptural Islamic narratives on the forefathers likewise supplement sacred scripture, they do not connect to the Qur’ān in quite the same manner as the midrash does to the Bible. Conventionally referred to as *isrā’īliyyāt*, these *hadīth* accounts are not directly exegetical as much as they are narrative supplements—often intended as historical and homiletical enhancements—that provide background material for characters appearing in the Qur’ān, as well as for specific others of whom Qur’ānic mention is never made. The name *isrā’īliyyāt* derives from both their content and their origin. Traditionally, the term applies to narratives about Banū Isrā’īl, the ancient Children of Israel.¹⁴ More commonly, the term indicates the stories and traditions particular to biblical figures, primarily the prophets, whose narratives are known also as *qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’*, Stories of the Prophets.¹⁵ The popularly and traditionally held notion about their origin states that these narratives entered the Islamic corpus through Jewish (and, less often, Christian) converts to Islam or through people who had been Jews or Christians for a period before becoming Muslim and who had thereby gained access to both the Torah and rabbinic literature.

As in the case of *midrash aggadah*, modern scholars have struggled to present a precise definition of the term. Goldziher defined *isrā’īliyyāt* as “invented stories about Biblical persons” and, more charitably, “legends of persons in Israelite times.” Goldziher later expanded his definition to include legends and sayings that come to complete and explain the Qur’ān on a given Scriptural topic or persona. He rightly pointed out, however, that it is not necessary that any Jewish figure appear in the story at all for it to be designated *isrā’īliyyāt*; nevertheless, most of the characters appearing in such texts are taken from rabbinic literature.¹⁶ Heller defines the narratives as legends

¹⁴ As opposed to the Jews who were Muḥammad’s contemporaries, known as *al-yahūd*.

¹⁵ There is some measure of disagreement as to whether the *isrā’īliyyāt* constitute a subcategory of the *qīṣāṣ* or if the *qīṣāṣ* are a subdivision of the *isrā’īliyyāt*. For more on this bifurcation, see Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 9–10. I have used the terms somewhat interchangeably, a choice which reflects their somewhat interchangeable meanings and usages.

¹⁶ Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1967, 1971), II:156 and “Mélanges Judéo-Arabes,” *Revue des Études Juives* 44 (1902): 65.

“springing from Jewish sources.”¹⁷ Jacob Lassner uses a less charged term when he translates *isrā’iliyyāt* with the equally ambiguous “*Israelitica*.”¹⁸ Perhaps more accurately, as we shall see throughout, Wasserstrom has explained *isrā’iliyyāt* as “Muslim reimaginings of Jewish traditions.”¹⁹

In the early period, the attitude of traditionists toward the collecting and use of these traditions was one of positive acceptance. *Isrā’iliyyāt* were considered outside witnesses from the older traditions which testified to the truth of the new religion.²⁰ According to Kister, one early tradition recorded in the *Risāla* of al-Shāfi’ī (d. 820 CE) demonstrates the early positive perspective: “The Prophet said: Transmit on my authority be it even one verse (from the Qur’ān), narrate (traditions) concerning the Children of Israel and there is nothing objectionable (in that).”²¹ This saying, which became widely current among Muslims in the first half of the second Islamic century (late 7th–8th century CE), reflects the similarly positive perspective put forth in the Qur’ān itself (10:94): “If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you then ask those who have been reading the book before you.” Such an affirmative conception of the material led to the understanding that the use of *isrā’iliyyāt* for elucidating certain aspects of Qur’ān and *hadīth* texts, for clarifying areas of vagueness, or for providing spiritual and moral guidance, was regarded as legitimate.²² *Isrā’iliyyāt* were thus treated and accepted as valid exegetical material, especially regarding the theme

¹⁷ “. . . les légendes qui se présentent provenant des sources juives.” Bernard Heller, “Récits et personnages bibliques dans la légende mahométane,” *Revue des Études Juives* 85 (1928): 136. On the origin of the term *isrā’iliyyāt*, see Roberto Tottoli, “Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā’iliyyāt* in Muslim Literature,” *Arabica* 46 (1999): 193–210.

¹⁸ Jacob Lassner, “Abraham Geiger: A 19th Century Jewish Reformer on the Origins of Islam,” in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam*, ed. Martin Kramer (Tel-Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies, 1999), 125.

¹⁹ Steven M. Wasserstrom, “Jewish Pseudepigrapha and *Qisāṣ al-Anbiyā’*,” in *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communications, and Interaction: Essays in Honor of William H. Brinner*, ed. Benjamin H. Harry, et al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), 237–256 *passim*.

²⁰ Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 174–5.

²¹ M. J. Kister, “*Haddīthū ‘an banī isrā’ila wa-lā ḥaraja*: A Study of an Early Tradition,” *IOS* 2 (1972): 215–239.

²² Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew*, 172–3, quoting C. E. Bosworth. Consulting these materials for legal advice was roundly prohibited.

of reward and punishment in both this world and the world to come.²³

Such Jewish (and Christian) materials were especially welcomed in proto-Shī‘i channels as early as the first century (7th century CE) but particularly in the second and third Islamic centuries in Kufa.²⁴ Shī‘i acceptance of the material stemmed largely from their understanding of the history of the prophets of Banū Isrā‘īl as prefiguring their own heroes. Most notably, Shī‘is drew a parallel between the Moses-Aaron relationship and the Muḥammad-‘Alī relationship; just as Aaron served as Moses’ second-in-command, so ‘Alī served as Muḥammad’s.²⁵ Moreover, Shī‘is looked favorably upon these Israelite accounts because Shī‘ism sought to establish the principle of *nass*, the delegation of Muḥammad’s authority to ‘Alī and then to the imams, as part of a process that began with Adam and continued with the prophets of Banū Isrā‘īl.²⁶ Indeed, as Wasserstrom writes, it would not be inaccurate to say that both Twelver and Ismā‘īlī Shī‘ism possessed a “Biblicizing” attitude toward their history.²⁷ So strong was the Shī‘i tendency to employ Judaic symbolism in an attempted self-legitimation that Sunni Muslims, recognizing it as such, used it both to mock and to invalidate them.²⁸

The Islamic texts themselves do not conceal the explicit and varied Jewish “sources” of their narratives. Al-Bukhārī (d. 870 CE), for example, relates that the Jews of Medina would read the Torah in Hebrew and translate it into Arabic for Muslims who came to interrogate them.²⁹ According to Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373 CE), Jewish and

²³ Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri* II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 15.

²⁴ Wasserstrom, “Jewish Pseudepigrapha,” 87–114.

²⁵ Uri Rubin, “Prophets and Progenitors in Early Shī‘a Tradition,” *JSAI* 1 (1979): 55. The Shī‘ite perspective does not seem to mind that parallelism is lacking. In looking to the Moses-Aaron relationship as a parallel and model, Shī‘ites hoped to validate ‘Alī’s claim to succeed Muḥammad as leader of the Muslims. However, while Aaron served as Moses’ vice-leader, he did not succeed him. Instead, Aaron died before Moses and Moses was succeeded by Joshua.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Wasserstrom, “The Shī‘is are the Jews of Our Community: An Interreligious Comparison with Sunnī Thought,” *IOS* 14 (1994): 298–299.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 314. On the idea that the Shī‘i movement was founded by a Jew of South Arabian origin, whom Wasserstrom calls Ibn Sabā, see also *EJ*, s.v. (sic) “Abdallāh ibn Sabā,” by Joseph Horovitz (2:53).

²⁹ Adang records M. J. Kister’s suggestion that the Muslims may even have written down what the Jews then taught them. See Adang, *Muslim Writers*, 7.

Christian material found its way into the Muslim corpus during the battle of Yarmuk in 636 CE. One day during the battle, ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ (d. 685–90 CE) came upon two camels laden with books containing the “knowledge of the People of the Book.” He used these books as sources from which he spread many *isrā’iliyyāt*.³⁰

Other authors simply quote specific Jewish sources outright. In a number of incidences, Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 CE) informs his audience that he has compared what had been transmitted to him through Muslim channels with what he has read in *al-Tawrāh*.³¹ Although he does not cite book and verse, the contents of his citations are remarkably accurate and suggest more than a passing familiarity with Jewish texts. Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 783 CE), Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 1176 CE), al-Rāwandī (c. 1178 CE) and others have been known to quote from *al-Tawrāh* from time to time as well.³² It is important to note that an Islamic reference to *al-Tawrāh* does not necessarily intend to refer exclusively to the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. Rather, it indicates the general corpus of rabbinic literature, often intending the midrashic literature or the *mishnah* (the code of Jewish law, codified in the 4th century CE). Additionally, a Muslim author’s claim to have “read” the Torah may well refer not to his actually having read it but to having collected the information needed with the help of people who knew these texts and quoted or read, translated, and explained them to the Muslims.³³

The Islamic tradition attributes the influx of “Israelite” material from the Jewish community into Islam to some of the most impor-

³⁰ Quoted by Tottoli, 203.

³¹ ‘Abdallāh ibn Muslim ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-ma‘ārif*, ed. Muḥammad Ismā‘il ‘Abdallāh al-Sāwī (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘a al-Islāmiyya, 1934), 15–16. According to Hava Lazarus Yafeh, one of the most well-known Arabic translations of the Hebrew Bible among Muslim scholars is that of the Egyptian rabbi, exegete, and grammarian Sa‘adia Gaon (882–942 CE), head of the talmudic academy at Sura in Babylonia. Ibn al-Nadīm even mentions Sa‘adia’s translation in his *Fihrist*. Ibn Qutayba, who died when Sa‘adia was still a small child, must have either had an earlier version of the Bible in Arabic or must have been familiar with the Hebrew original. For more on Arabic versions of Bible and Muslim Bible ‘citations,’ see Hava Lazarus Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 112–118.

³² See examples in Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāṭa (Cairo: al-Hayā‘ al-Miṣriyya al-‘āmma lil-kitāb, 1979–1989), 1:17 and 156; Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. ‘Umar ibn Gharāma al-‘Amrawī (Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 1995–), 6:164; Qutb al-Dīn al-Rāwandī, *al-Kharā’ij wa-l-jara’iḥ* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-nūr lil-maṭbū‘āt, 1991), 3:1015.

³³ Lazarus Yafeh, 121.

tant figures active in the early, developing years of the Islamic religion. Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 688 CE), a cousin and Companion of Muḥammad, was widely considered by the Islamic sources to have acquired a good measure of proficiency in Israelite traditions. So extensive was his knowledge that he is called حبر العرب (*habr al-‘arab*), “the rabbi (*haver*) of the Arabs.”³⁴ ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ, the man who found the book-laden camels, is said to have learned Hebrew and studied Syriac; he was also known to have read the books of *ahl al-kitāb*, the People of the Book, and to have transmitted from them. According to Ibn Sa‘d (d. 845 CE), ‘Abdallāh studied Jewish traditions with a Yarmukite man named Sirāj, one of the *ahl al-kitāb*. Ibn Lahī‘a (d. 790 CE), an early traditionist, transmitted a tradition in which ‘Abdallāh dreamed he was licking honey from one hand and butter from another. He reported his strange dream to Muḥammad who interpreted it to mean that ‘Abdallāh was destined to read two books, the Torah and *al-Furqān* (the Qur’ān). And, records the tradition, so he did.³⁵ Comparable traditions relate of Abū Jald of Basra (late 7th–early 8th cent. CE) that he alternated between reciting from the Qur’ān and from the Torah, manuscripts of which he himself owned. Abū Jald would also summon people to celebrate the conclusion of each Torah reading, whereupon he would cite a teaching that mercy descends upon just such an occasion.³⁶ In addition to this, these gatherings sound very much like the traditional Jewish *siyyum tanakh*, a celebration held when a person or group of people concludes studying the entire Torah or a large portion thereof. Ibn Sa‘d records a story locating ‘Āmir ibn ‘Abd al-Qays, one of Muḥammad’s Companions from the Banū ‘Āmir ibn ‘Aṣar,³⁷ in a mosque listening

³⁴ One example appears in al-Ṭabarī: “Salama—Ibn Ishāq—Hākim ibn Jubayr—Sa‘id ibn Jubayr: A Jew said to me in Kufa while I was preparing for hajj: Which of the two terms did Moses complete? I said: I don’t know but I am now going to the rabbi (حبر, *hibr*) of the Arabs—meaning Ibn ‘Abbās—and I will ask him about it.” See Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-ma‘arif, 1961(?)-77), 1:399 (1/462).

³⁵ Abdulaziz Sachedina, “Early Muslim Traditionists and Their Familiarity with Jewish Sources,” in *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions* II, eds. William Brinner and Stephen Ricks (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 51. Also cited in Kister, “*Haddīthū*,” 231. One should note that this tradition was later vehemently attacked by Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Dhahabī (1274–1348 CE) in his *Ta’rīkh al-Islām* (Cairo: Maktabat al-qudsī, 1368 AH [1947]), 3:38.

³⁶ Kister, “*Haddīthū*,” 231–232. See also Nabia Abbott, *Studies*, II: 9.

³⁷ Muḥammad ibn Sa‘d, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubra* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ilmīyya, 1990), 6:85. Ibn Sa‘d gives no birth or death date.

as Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. ca. 652 CE), an early convert from Judaism, read the Torah and explained some interesting passages to him.³⁸ Reports on Zayd ibn Thābit (d. 665/6 CE), Muḥammad's scribe and later the editor-in-chief of the authoritative 'Uthmānic version of the Qur'ān, record that he learned not only the Hebrew script from the Jews, but, when he was a boy growing up in Medina, also learned from them how to read Arabic. According to Michael Lecker, *hadīth* evidence demonstrates that after Zayd's father died in the Battle of Bu'āth in 617 CE and before Zayd went on the *hijra*, he was raised by a Jewish Medinese group known as the Banū Māsika.³⁹ According to Lecker, *hadīth* reports suggest that most of the pre-Islamic literate Arabs of Medina studied literacy in the *beit midrash* (house of learning), or "maṭṭab," of the Banū Māsika where it was probably taught through Arabic translations of the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁰ Abū Bakr and 'Umar were said to visit this *beit midrash* to hear what the Jews were teaching and studying. 'Umar formed the habit of dropping in on his way to his property in the upper part of the city.⁴¹

Other figures active in the early years to whom familiarity with Jewish texts is attributed include Muḥammad's kinsman and son-in-law 'Alī, the copyist Mālik ibn Dinār (d. 744 CE) who studied Hebrew and read Jewish and Christian texts, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī (one of earliest converts and a Companion, d. 652–3 CE) and the

³⁸ Kister, "Haddithū," 231–232. Scholars have suggested that "Ka'b al-Aḥbār" derives from the Hebrew, "Ya'aqov he-Haver," meaning possibly "Jacob the Rabbi." In amoraic times (c. 200–400 CE), *haver* either referred to a fellow student or designated a person worthy of honor. See *EJ*, s.v. "Titles," by Daniel Sperber (15: 1163–64).

³⁹ Michael Lecker, "Zayd b. Thābit, A Jew with Two Sidelocks: Judaism and Literacy in Pre-Islamic Medina (Yathrib)," *JNES* 56 (1997): 259–273. Lecker cites an overabundance of evidence pointing to the strong influence of Medinese Judaism on the lives of Zayd and his paternal family members. Among other facts, it appears that his step-uncle, 'Amr ibn al-Hazm, was raised by the Jewish Banū Nadir as a Jew and went with them at their expulsion from Medina; his step-father, 'Umāra ibn al-Hazm, was an expert in amulets, a field of magic practiced by Medinian Jewry (p. 263).

⁴⁰ Lecker posits that the study house of the Banū Māsika is the same as the more well-known study house of the Banū Qaynuqā'; both parties lived in lower Medina and may in fact be one and the same group. See "Zayd," 264–71. See also Lecker, "'Amr ibn Hazm al-Anṣārī and Qur'ān 2, 256: 'No compulsion is there in religion,'" *Oriens* 35 (1996): 57–64; Abbott, *Studies*, II: 8.

⁴¹ Abbott, *Studies*, II: 8.

prolific traditionist and Companion Abū Hurayra (d. 677 CE).⁴² In addition to these were also men who had converted to Islam only after having been Jewish or Christian, such as Khadīja's one-time Christian cousin Waraqā ibn Nawfal, the former Persian slave and Christian Salmān al-Fārisī (d. ca. 654–5 CE),⁴³ and the former Jews Ka'b al-Āḥbār the Yemenite⁴⁴ and 'Abdallāh ibn Salām (d. 663 CE) from Medina.⁴⁵ So too the powerful 7th century Arabian prince who became an early follower of Muḥammad, Ḥabīb ibn Mālik, professed Judaism for a while. It is said that Abū Mālik 'Abdallāh ibn Sām of Kinda, the "imam" of the Medinian Jewish Banū Qurayṣa, and his sons Tha'labā and 'Uqba, all of them first generation *ṭābi'ūn* (Successors),⁴⁶ survived the massacre of the Banū Qurayṣa in 627 CE because of their conversion to Islam. Importantly for our point here, the younger survivors grew up to be respected *ḥadīth* transmitters.⁴⁷ Likewise, Ḥudhayfa ibn Yamān al-Azdī (d. 656 CE),⁴⁸ otherwise known as Ḥudhayfa ibn Miḥṣan, one of the Companions to go to Yemen and Muḥammad's governor in Dabā, was a former Jew who converted to Islam; he refused to return to his previous

⁴² Abbott, *Studies*, II: 8–9.

⁴³ Recently, G. Levi Della Vida has written that historical material attesting to Salmān's existence is so vague that "it is with difficulty that one can even admit that his legend is based on the actual fact of the conversion of a Medinian slave of Persian origin." See *EI²* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960– [i.e. 1954]), s.v. "Salmān al-Fārisī" by G. Levi Della Vida (Supplement Fasc. 9–10: 701–702).

⁴⁴ On Waraqā's Christian background, see Ibn Hishām, *Kitāb Sirat Rasūl Allāh. Das Leben Muḥammad's nach Muḥammad ibn Ishāk bearbeitet von Abd el-Malik ibn Hishām*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Göttingen: Dieterichsche Universitäts-Buchhandlung, 1860), 143. For more on Ka'b see: Moshe Perlmann, "A Legendary Story of Ka'b al-Āḥbār's Conversion to Islam," in *The Joshua Starr Memorial Volume; Studies in History and Philology*, Jewish Social Studies, no. 5 (New York: Conference on Jewish Relations, 1953), 85–99; idem, "Another Ka'b al-Āḥbār Story," *JQR* 45 (1954): 48–58; and, *EI²*, s.v. "Ka'b al-Āḥbār" by M. Schmitz (4:316–317). Schwarzbaum points out that Ka'b and other traditionists may not have transmitted as much material as is attributed to them but often served as "personality pegs" on which many Jewish and Christian legends were hung throughout the centuries of Islamic history. See his *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends*, 57–8. On 'Abdallāh ibn Salām, see *EI²*, s.v. "'Abdallāh b. Salām" by J. Horovitz (1:52); and, Hirschfeld, 109–111.

⁴⁵ Abbott, *Studies*, II: 8–9.

⁴⁶ Ibn Sa'd, 5:58, s.v. "Tha'labā b. Abī Mālik." Ibn Sa'd does not give a birth or death date for any of these.

⁴⁷ Michael Lecker, "Abū Mālik 'Abdallāh b. Sām of Kinda, A Jewish Convert to Islam," *Der Islam* 71 (1987): 280–282.

⁴⁸ Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb* (Beirut: Dār al-ṣādir, 1968), 2:220.

religion despite the pressure of his former coreligionists.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it is generally believed that the first book of *isrā’iliyyāt*, *Kitāb al-Mubtada’*, was composed by Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 728 CE), a Yemenite Jewish convert to Islam and student of the aforementioned *isrā’iliyyāt* source, Ibn ‘Abbās.⁵⁰ So great is the number of early Muslims with Jewish knowledge that Reuven Firestone posits a possible stage in early Islam in which “Biblicist Muslims” represented a faction parallel to the Judeo-Christians of early Christianity.⁵¹

The tradition credits even Muhammad himself with being a possible source of *isrā’iliyyāt*. According to materials studied by Nabia Abbott, Muhammad joined Abū Bakr and ‘Umar on their trips to the Medinese Jewish house of learning to learn from the Jews. All three men, she notes, were known to have had serious theological discussions with Jews or Jewish converts. Muhammad and ‘Umar were on more than one occasion known to have possessed Jewish manuscripts.⁵² Islamic tradition credits Muhammad with expertise not only in Jewish narrative but in Jewish legal affairs as well. Al-Tabarī’s

⁴⁹ Michael Lecker, “Hudhayfa b. al-Yamān and ‘Ammār b. Yāsir, Jewish Converts to Islam,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 11 (1993): 149–162.

⁵⁰ M. J. Kister maintains that the first such book was actually compiled by Hammād ibn Salama (d. 783 CE). Neither Wahb’s nor Hammād’s book has survived to modern times. Noted by Fred M. Donner in his *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1998), p. 156 n. 34. Norman Calder points out that later the term *isrā’iliyyāt* began to appear as a book title but without a connection to any specific author. He posits that these were small books or pamphlets on legends such as the creation of the world and the like. See Calder, “*Tafsīr* from Tabarī to Ibn Kathīr: problems in the description of a genre, illustrated with reference to the story of Abraham” in *Approaches to the Qur’ān*, eds. G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader Shareef (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 107–8. For more on Wahb, see: Nabia Abbott, “Wahb b. Munabbih: A Review Article,” *JNES* 36 (1977): 103–112; A. A. Duri, “The Beginnings of Historical Folklore: Wahb ibn Munabbih” in his *The Rise of Historical Writing Among the Arabs*, trans. Lawrence Conrad (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 122–136; Hirschberg, “*Sippure ha-Torah*,” 92–106; Raif Georges Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih: Der Heidelberger Papyrus PSR Heid Arab* 23 (Weisbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1972). Narratives of the same category were also used by Hasan al-Basrī (d. 728 CE), a contemporary of Wahb. See *EP*, s.v. “*Isrā’iliyyāt*” by Georges Vajda (6:212).

⁵¹ Firestone, “Abraham’s Journey to Mecca in Islamic Exegesis: A Form-Critical Study of a Tradition,” *Studia Islamica* 76 (1992): 24.

⁵² Abbott, *Studies*, II: 7–8. Interestingly, the same idea appears in the Qur’ān, where it is intended not as a statement of fact but as a quote from and mockery of Muhammad’s opponents. According to *sūra* 25:5–9, “They say: These are legends of the ancients/earlier communities (اساطير الالٰئن, *asātir al-awwalīn*) which he has got written down for himself, and they are dictated to him morning and evening . . . (v. 9) They are lost and cannot find the way.”

exegesis of Q 5:41 relates that Muḥammad was once passing by the Medinese *beit midrash* as the Jewish sages were dealing with a case of adultery about which they could not reach a decision. Noting Muḥammad passing, they called to him and asked him to adjudicate. He ruled that the adulterous couple should be stoned, in accordance with Torah law. At this, ‘Abdallāh ibn Ḥūrāyā, then “the most expert and wisest of Jews in Medina,” admitted that Muḥammad was the most expert in Torah matters but that the Jewish sages could not admit that fact due to their own jealousy.⁵³ According to Michael Lecker, Muḥammad’s family may also have provided him with access to Jewish information. Lecker points to Muslim accounts reporting that Muḥammad’s great-grandfather Hāshim married a Jewish woman from Khaybar and fathered children with her.⁵⁴ Thus Muḥammad’s grandfather, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the leader of the Quraysh when Muḥammad was born, had elder brothers of Jewish descent, Jews according to Jewish law. One should mention here that Muḥammad followed his great-grandfather’s tradition and himself married a Jewish woman, Ṣafiyā, a prisoner of war captured at the massacre of the Jews of Khaybar.

Despite their illustrious beginnings and early acceptance into the Islamic corpus, the *isrā’iliyyāt* quickly fell out favor with normative orthodox Muslim jurists. This shift began in the Abbasid period, or even slightly beforehand when the Islamic community began turning away from seeking external confirmation from other communities and turned inward to emphasize strictly Islamic values.⁵⁵ One indication of this shift in attitude appears in an incident cited by ʿIkrima (d. 723/4), a client of Ibn ‘Abbās, regarding two well-known and authoritative *isrā’iliyyāt* sources: word came to Ibn ‘Abbās one day that Ka'b al-Aḥbār had been teaching that on Resurrection Day

⁵³ As quoted by Haggai Ben-Shammai in “Jew-Hatred in the Islamic Tradition and the Koranic Exegesis,” in *Anti-Semitism through the Ages*, ed. Shmuel Almog and trans. Nathan H. Reisner (Oxford: Published for the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, by Pergamon Press, 1988), 166.

⁵⁴ According to Michael Lecker, this information is found in the section on “the Qurashīs who were sons of Jewish women” in *Kitāb al-munammaq fī akhbār quraysh* by Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb (d. 860 CE). See his “A Note on Early Marriage Links between Qurayshīs and Jewish Women,” *JSAI* 10 (1987): 17–39.

⁵⁵ Gordon Newby, “*Tafsīr Isrā’iliyyāt*,” *Studies in Qur’ān and Tafsīr* in *JAAR* 47 (1979 Thematic Issue): 694.

the sun and the moon would be brought forward as if they were two castrated bulls and would be thrown into hell. Immediately, Ibn ‘Abbās jumped to his feet and commenced yelling at Ka‘b’s attempt at purposeful “judaizing.” When news of Ibn ‘Abbās’ reaction reached Ka‘b, Ka‘b approached Ibn ‘Abbās and apologized, saying that he read this tradition in *kitāb al-dāris*, possibly a midrash book, and was unaware of the level of Jewishness therein.⁵⁶ According to Uri Rubin, anti-Israelite sentiment also stands behind exegesis of the Qur’ānic account in which Jewish and Christian sinners are punished by being transformed into apes and pigs (Q 2:65, 5:65, 7:163ff). Rubin demonstrates that when such punishment was later applied to Muslims, it pertained only to those sinners whose deeds contained a Jewish or Christian connotation. These transformative punishments, he writes, were designed to confront Jewish and Christian elements that had penetrated Islamic society and were now considered a threat to genuine Islamic identity.⁵⁷

With Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE) and principally Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373 CE), the term *isrā’īliyyāt* entered into official exegetical terminology to designate dubious traditions that, in the opinion of these authors at least, had nothing to do with Islam. They were to be rejected either because of their obvious Jewish origin, which could not be trusted, or because of their objectionable content.⁵⁸ Objectionable content often indicated that which contradicted an Islamic value or was too obviously fantastical and extravagant.⁵⁹ Practically speaking, however, scholars have noted that many narratives rejected on the grounds of “objectionable content” are often indistinguishable from their acceptable counterparts.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Cited by Newby, *ibid.*, 686–7; David J. Halperin and Gordon Newby, “Two Castrated Bulls: A Study in the Aggadah of Ka‘b al-Albār,” *JASOS* 102:4 (1982): 631–638. I have been unable to imagine what the practical representation of the sun and moon as castrated bulls would look like or what Jewish source stands behind Ka‘b’s reference. Halperin and Newby attempt to reconstruct a now lost midrash based on this description. See n. 67.

⁵⁷ Uri Rubin, “Apes, Pigs and the Islamic Identity,” *IOS* 17 (1997): 89–105.

⁵⁸ See Calder, “*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr,” 101–140; Andrew Rippin, “Interpreting the Bible through the Qur’ān” in Hawting and Shareef, 249–259; Totolli, “Origin and Use,” 207–208.

⁵⁹ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “Assessing the *Isrā’īliyyāt*: An exegetical conundrum” in *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature*, ed. Stefan Leder (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz-Verlag, 1998), 364.

⁶⁰ For more on the Islamic rejection of Jewish and Christian elements, see M. J. Kister, “Do Not Assimilate Yourselves’ *Lā tashabbahū*,” *JSAI* 12 (1989): 320–371.

The negative official attitude toward the *isrā’iliyyāt*, however, did not prevent such material from continuing to appear in classical Islamic literature. *Isrā’iliyyāt* traditions are preserved in mystical writings, compilations of histories, works of *hadīth* and *qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’* and other such material.⁶¹ They appear in *Qur’ān* commentaries (*tafsīr*) as well, such as that of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (713–767 CE), Ibn Bishr (d. 821 CE),⁶² ‘Abd al-Razzāq (744–827 CE) and al-Tabarī (838–923 CE).⁶³ Muhammad Abū Shahba’s modern study of *isrā’iliyyāt* demonstrates the extent to which *isrā’iliyyāt* were accepted into the *tafsīr* literature. Abū Shahba presents numerous narratives from *tafsīr* writings and divides them into valid exegesis and those that are fabricated “Jewish falsifications,” i.e. *isrā’iliyyāt*.⁶⁴ That Abū Shahba finds enough material for his study drives home the fact that at some point *isrā’iliyyāt* were considered valid and acceptable material to the classical Muslim scholars and survived in the authoritative literature even to modern times.

Despite Islamic claims either crediting or discrediting this genre, the stories designated by medieval Muslim scholars as “Israelite tales” cannot be found in Jewish literature in the same form in which they appear in the Islamic sources. Although it may have originated elsewhere, a story deemed by Islam an “Israelite tale” is actually a unique and authentically Islamic product. As Norman Calder has

⁶¹ Vajda, “*Isrā’iliyyāt*.”

⁶² Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 37.

⁶³ As noted by Kister in “Legends in *tafsīr* and *hadīth* Literature: The Creation of Adam and Related Stories,” in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 82–84. Patricia Crone refers to the exegetical activity of the early *qūṣāṣ* in “Two Legal Problems Bearing on the Early History of the Qur’ān,” *JSAI* 18 (1994): 11. According to Goldziher, not only were the *qūṣāṣ* mentioned with distinction as expounders of the Qur’ān but Muhammad referred to the Qur’ān itself as “*ahsan al-qasāṣ*,” the best of stories/histories (Q 12:3). See his *Muslim Studies*, II:152–3.

⁶⁴ Muhammad ibn Muḥammad Abū Shahba, *al-Isrā’iliyyāt wa-l-mawdū’āt fi kutub al-tafsīr* (Cairo: Maktabat al-sunna, 1981). Other modern authors likewise reflect a continued anti-*isrā’iliyyāt* position. The 20th century author Maḥmoud Abū Rayya mixes modern politics with history when he claims that Ka’b was not only a Jew but the first Zionist, a historically inaccurate epithet that is not meant to be complimentary or even neutral but which is intended to discredit Ka’b further. See Ronald Nettler, “Early Islam, Modern Islam, and Judaism: The *Isrā’iliyyāt* in Modern Islamic Thought” in *Muslim-Jewish Encounters, Intellectual Traditions and Modern Politics*, ed. Ronald Nettler and Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 1–14.

asserted, every narrative realization is a new creation in and of itself.⁶⁵ It is for this reason that Wasserstrom has termed this genre of literature, “Muslim reimaginings of Jewish traditions.”⁶⁶ Ka'b's description of castrated bulls constitutes just such an example of this point. Although the idea may have originated in the Jewish apocryphal milieu, as Halperin and Newby attempt to show, the form in which it appears in al-Tabarī's citation (attributed to ‘Ikrima) appears nowhere in Jewish literature.⁶⁷ It is instead a wholly Muslim reworking of the earlier idea.

The *isrā’iliyyāt* narratives tend toward the dramatic and colorful, often allowing for the influx of elements that improve the tell-ability of the story. Indeed, many of the tales retain the language, style, and often truncated versions of motifs from the literary milieu which influenced the *quṣṣāṣ* (story-tellers) responsible for their spread. Yet, at the same time, they are also a type of exegesis, explaining and providing background information for the lacuna-filled Qur’ānic text. In so doing, they serve as preservers of Islamic values and ideals. In our attempt to unearth the underlying messages of the texts and in examining the paths the motifs traveled, our attention will focus on those components that differ from the earlier Jewish accounts which may have influenced them. We will also investigate those elements which deviate from the later Jewish accounts which may have been influenced by them. These components display most clearly the specifically Muslim perspective at work.

⁶⁵ Norman Calder, “From Midrash to Scripture: The Sacrifice of Abraham in Early Islamic Tradition,” *Le Muséon* 101 (1988): 386–7. See also Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham–Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 13.

⁶⁶ Wasserstrom, “Jewish Pseudepigrapha and *Qisāṣ al-Anbiyā’*,” 237–256.

⁶⁷ Halperin and Newby propose that emphasis on the punishment of astral beings in two of the major sections of the Book of Enoch served as Ka'b's source (“Two Castrated Bulls,” p. 636). They also suggest that Ka'b may have been referring to a now missing midrash on Gen. 49:6, “For in their anger they killed a man, and in their self-will they maimed oxen,” (p. 637). As they themselves caution, reconstructing midrashim from Islamic sources is a hazardous business. Despite this awareness, Newby does just this in “The Drowned Son: Midrash and Midrash Making in the Qur’ān and *Tafsīr*” in *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions*, edited by William Brinner and Steven Ricks (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986): 19–32.

A Word on Methodology

My approach to the texts does not derive from the methodology of any one field or author. Instead, it combines a close reading of the material at hand with a modified version of Daniel Boyarin's theory of intertextuality. Underlying my approach are also James Kugel's nine theses for biblical exegesis, here applied equally to the study of Qur'ānic exegesis.⁶⁸

Boyarin and Intertextuality

Boyarin's theory of intertextuality proves crucial for understanding the possibility of one text's influence upon another text, a key element of this study. The first use of the term "intertextuality" occurred in the writings of Julia Kristeva in 1966 where she defined it as signifying that "every text is constructed as a mosaic of citations; every text is an absorption and transformation of other texts."⁶⁹ Building on this definition Boyarin writes, "every text is constrained by the literary system of which it is a part and [...] every text is ultimately dialogical in that it cannot but record the traces of its contentions and doubling of earlier discourses."⁷⁰ In other words, every text operates within its literary system and, as part of a system, it receives the imprint of those texts that preceded it. As semi-sacred biographical narratives on the ancient forebears, *midrash aggadah* and *isrā'iliyyāt/qiṣāṣ al-anbiyā'* can be viewed as colleagues in a shared literary system. As such, the transfer of information back and forth between them should come as no surprise; rather, one should almost expect it. As Calder pointed out, texts in isolation are meaningless.⁷¹ It is precisely the exchange of information between the traditions that provides our texts with their significance. In line with the theory of intertextual studies, the purpose of this project is thus not "source-hunting."⁷²

⁶⁸ These will be enumerated and explained below.

⁶⁹ See Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1986), s.v. "Intertextuality," by Alice Jardine.

⁷⁰ Boyarin, 14.

⁷¹ Calder, "Tafsīr from Tabarī," 105.

⁷² The term "source-hunting" was used by Jonathan Culler in his "Intertextuality and Presupposition," *Modern Language Notes*, 91 (1976): 1383. Reuven Firestone clarifies that from a religious perspective there is an "original" text—the specific rendering of a legend or sacred myth derived from Scripture. From a literary perspective, employed here, there can be no attainable absolute original. Like all human creations,

Rather, it investigates the relationship between the Jewish and Islamic textual traditions and analyzes the resulting values that are thus displayed.

Kugel and Textual Interpretation

Further methodological inspiration derives from James Kugel's nine "theses" of early biblical interpretation.⁷³ While all nine prove helpful in understanding the workings of the Abrahamic midrash, four present themselves as particularly significant for dealing with the Islamic material as well. The first supposition agrees with what has already been explained above. Namely, one must understand that most of the rabbinic midrashic narratives, what Kugel terms "narrative expansions," have as their point of departure some peculiarity in the biblical text itself. They are not narratives of entertainment but are homiletical and exegetical biblical explanations.⁷⁴ The same holds true for the *isrā'iyyāt*, which likewise are not purely entertainment but constitute narratives of religious significance. Therefore, as already noted, when the information provided in a later midrash departs from the goal of the genre and exhibits little exegetical or homiletical value, we will investigate this as a possible sign of influence from the Islamic corpus. Similarly, when the Islamic version of a pre-Islamic midrash departs significantly from the earlier text, we

these narratives are indebted to an infinite series of associations with earlier and contemporaneous creations. See his *Journeys in Holy Lands*, 155–6. There are, however, datable earlier versions whose impact can be traced in the later renditions.

⁷³ His "theses" are actually conclusions that resulted from his study of midrash. Succinctly stated, they are: 1) Narrative expansions are formally a kind of biblical exegesis arising from some peculiarity in the biblical text itself. 2) The study of midrashic motifs is first an exercise in "reverse-engineering" in which certain standard questions ought repeatedly to be asked. 3) Exegetical motifs generally arise out of only one focus or site; only later will the motif be made out to be addressing two or more verses simultaneously. 4) Exegetical motifs travel. 5) Motifs, and their individual elements, often become combined or harmonized with other motifs. 6) One exegetical motif can influence the creation or development of another. 7) The more obvious the problem raised by a biblical text, the likelier it is that there exists a very ancient motif to answer it. 8) Rabbinic texts have a striking interest in connecting one biblical text or problem to another at some remove from the first. 9) Early exegetical documents seem to argue, both by their very form and by the overwhelming store of shared motifs, that there existed well before the Common Era a body of standard explanations of various problems and peculiarities in the biblical text. See Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 247–270.

⁷⁴ After all, "the early exegete is an expositor with an axe to grind" (Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 248).

will consider what Islamic value, if any, the difference is intended to relay.

The second thesis (Kugel's number three) states that one ought to consider the question of “reverse-engineering” when considering midrash. Namely, would an exegete, faced with problem X in the biblical text, be likely to create solution Y which appears in the midrash? If not, maintains Kugel, solution Y probably already existed, was “borrowed” by the exegete from elsewhere, and recycled for problem X. This project will use the Islamic material as one possible source of solution Y for the post-Qur'ānic midrash texts. In other words, the later midrash periodically differs from the earlier pre-Islamic version, sometimes contradicting what the earlier sages established and sometimes adding details that initially strike the reader as simply extraneous. In such cases, we will look to the intervening Muslim texts as a possible source of or inspiration for the difference. Kugel's thesis will also prove applicable to the Islamic narratives, which often differ from the pre-existing Jewish material from which they draw. One may ask equally of the Islamic texts: given the story the traditionists wanted to relate, what Islamic value does this new or different piece of information add to the story?

Kugel's third relevant thesis (his number four) states that “exegetical motifs travel” and “transfers of affects” occur. In the first case, Kugel intends that a motif originally created to explain one verse is adopted by an exegete to explain another verse. While this sometimes results in insignificant redundancy, at other times it serves as a purposeful allusion to the first instance. In other words, the exegete wants the reader to think simultaneously about both the verse under discussion and the original locus of the motif and its implications. Related to this, a “transfer of affects,” explains Kugel, occurs when the original connection between an exegetical motif and the verse it was designed to explain becomes completely lost and the now free motif then becomes attached to something else. Although Kugel contends that such movement of motifs occurs intramidrashically, from *Genesis Rabbah* to *Leviticus Rabbah* for example, we will apply this theory to the movement and transfer of artifacts between the midrash and the *isrā'īliyyāt/qisas al-anbiyā'*. As exegeses of sacred scripture, particularly on the self-same character (Abraham, for example), ultimately the two corpora form a unified body of literature. We will see that a motif originally intended to explain a difficulty in the early midrash regarding one specific character, will travel into the Islamic

biography of another. This new association between motif and character will travel back into the later midrash and appear there in its new form. In so doing, the original connection between motif and scriptural point becomes lost and a transfer of affects ensues, establishing the motif in its new place.

The fourth conclusion (Kugel's number nine) declares that the explanations inherent in the narrative expansions were not originally gathered together and passed down in written form. They were passed on orally, perhaps taught to children and adults as part of their course of study, or perhaps communicated to the community with the public liturgical reading of Scripture. So prevalent was the information amongst the community that a Jew did not have to be literate in order to have been familiar with the teachings of the tradition. The same tendency to oral transmission holds true in the Muslim case. Early on in the Islamic period, injunctions were promulgated against writing down the Qur'ān, the *hadīth*, and other such materials.⁷⁵ Regarding popularly known and orally communicated material, which we have here, it does not take much to imagine that Jews and Muslims in close quarters would become familiar with each other's traditions as they were bandied about. This contention receives support from Fred Donner's hypothesis that the original community of believers (*mu'minūn*) was conceptualized independent of confessional identities and originally included Jews, Christians, and other monotheists.⁷⁶ As members of the same social and even religious community, Muslims and Jews would have been able to pass information back and forth easily through social, likely oral, interactions.

⁷⁵ For more on this, see Abbott, *Studies*, II: 10–14; Michael Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing Tradition in Early Islam,” *Arabica* 44 (1997): 437–530. Early Judaism also originally eschewed writing down traditions, an attitude that resulted in the terse, and thus more easily committed to memory, code of law known as the *Mishna*. For more on this, see H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 31–42; *EJ*, s.v. “Mishnah” by E. E. Urbach (12:93–109).

⁷⁶ Fred M. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Patterns in Communal Identity*, ed. Lawrence Conrad (Princeton: The Darwin Press, forthcoming), esp. p. 8.

Dating

The final methodological point concerns the dating of the texts. As a general rule, I have understood the Qur’ānic text to have been earlier rather than later, in accordance with Fred Donner.⁷⁷ Wansbrough’s hypothesis states that different parts of the Qur’ān originated in different communities, possibly even different geographical areas, and did not assume final form until late in the second Islamic century (end 8th century CE).⁷⁸ Donner points out that this theory depends mainly on circumstantial evidence. Donner’s more convincing analysis points to a relatively early crystallization date for the Qur’ānic text, likely before the First Civil War (656–661 CE). As for the exegetical literature employed here, which uses the Qur’ān as its jumping off point, all can be dated according to the life spans of their authors. Where more information is necessary in order to understand a particular text better, I have provided the relevant details. The dating of the midrashic texts is somewhat more complicated since they are frequently anonymous compositions. In dealing with the midrashic texts, I have relied upon the traditionally accepted dates put forth in both the *Encyclopedia Judaica* and H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger’s *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*.⁷⁹

A word should be said here about the dating of a number of the post-Qur’ānic midrashic texts. Some of these later works contain material known to pre-date Islam. The works themselves however were compiled and closed to new information only at a later date, after the rise and development of Islam and often in Islamic countries. I have thus treated any accounts which first appear *only* in these late texts, and not in the earlier pre-Islamic works, as products of the later period. Some may argue that it is possible that these motifs

⁷⁷ Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 35–63. Barakat and Watt place the Qur’ān even earlier, as early as the Meccan period of Muhammad’s life. See Ahmad Barakat, *Muhammad and the Jews—A Re-examination* (India: Vikas Publishing House PVT Ltd, 1979), 5; Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1953), 60, 81. Donner’s thesis, that the crystallization into the current form did not take place till slightly later, strikes me as more convincing.

⁷⁸ John Wansbrough, *Qur’ānic Studies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), chapter one. Crone supports Wansbrough’s date in “Two Legal Problems,” 16.

⁷⁹ *Encyclopedia Judaica* (New York: Ktav, 1972); H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

and narratives existed in oral form much earlier and were committed to writing only at a later point. While such a contention may turn out to be correct, current scholarship cannot function with such an unproven or factually unsupported assumption. Where there is no earlier preserved account, and the later account displays evidence of Islamic influence, I have assumed the pericope to be late, in accordance with the date of the work itself.

Furthermore, some of the works which I have referred to here as “midrashic” are not, strictly speaking, part of the canonical midrashic corpus. Some are apocryphal and pseudepigraphical works while others are medieval texts. I have included them under the rubric of “midrash” for this study because, like canonical midrash, they are narrative expansions that aim to explain, both exegetically and homiletically, the biblical text. Moreover, even though these were not considered canonical by the rabbinic authorities, these early and later texts prove indispensable in tracing the development of the motifs in Jewish literature as well as in Islam.

Names

In order to differentiate between the characters as they appear in their Islamic and midrashic incarnations, I have chosen to refer to them by different names. Thus, the forefather is *Ibrāhīm* in the Islamic context and Abraham in the midrashic context. This same system applies to other shared characters: *Mūsā*/Moses, *Īsa*/Jesus, *Namrūd*/Nimrod, *Bukhtnaşşar*/Nebuchadnezzar, Allah/God, etc.

I do not intend to imply by this use of these Anglicized forms that the Jewish versions rank as the “normative.” Rather, I have chosen to refer to the Muslim characters as the Muslim sources do, a move shared by academic writers on Islam. I have employed the Anglicized versions of the Hebrew because the case of the Hebrew names is somewhat more complicated. Not all of the Jewish sources utilized here were written in or have been preserved in Hebrew; often these do not refer to the characters by their Hebrew appellation but by a translated or transliterated name. Additionally, unless they are writing in Hebrew, academics generally do not refer to these characters by their ‘Hebrew names’; these appear mostly in religious, not academic, circles. Furthermore, the name of God poses a particular problem in the Biblical and rabbinic sources in that it

does not appear in any standard form. The Bible utilizes a host of names. The rabbinic sources either echo these or refer to the deity as ‘ה (H’), short for הָשֵׁם (*ha-Shem*), meaning “the Name;” just as observant Jews utter the name of God only in prayer, otherwise referring to the deity as *ha-Shem*, so too they traditionally write *ha-Shem* in texts that are either not holy (as a Bible is) or might be treated disrespectfully. For uniformity’s sake, therefore, I have chosen to refer to the “Jewish” deity simply as “God” or “the Lord.”

Additionally, readers may notice that periodically Biblical quotes refer to the forefather as “Abram” while the rabbinic texts, and my narrative, continuously refer to him as Abraham. In Genesis 17:5, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham. The rabbinic sources preserve the earlier form of the name in citing the earlier verses. The character himself remains “Abraham.”

Summary of the Chapters

The five chapters following this introductory chapter and the excursus chart the basic chronological development of the character known as Abraham/Ibrāhīm from an ordinary everyman into the Muslim and Jewish forefather. Chapter One, “Prophecy and the Pre-Natal Patriarch,” begins the study with a look at the prophetic predictions of the birth of the forefather. Although the Qur’ān and the Torah provide no information regarding this initial stage of the patriarch’s life, the extra-Scriptural accounts of both Islam and Judaism reveal in similar details. This chapter challenges the traditional view of the episode’s direction of influence and examines the significance of the subtle shift in the timing of the prophecy as the motif traveled from one milieu to another.

Chapter Two moves from the patriarch’s birth to the next major episode in his life, his discovery of monotheism. Once more, the traditionally held view of the primacy of the Jewish texts over the Islamic comes under scrutiny. Furthermore, as in the previous chapter, analysis of both the Islamic and midrashic narratives reveals the differing conceptualizations of the forefather’s character regarding his place in the free-will vs. predestination debate.

Shorter albeit equally important motifs relevant to Abraham’s/Ibrāhīm’s life hold the focus of Chapter Three, “Finger Food, Wet-Nurses, and Fate,” and Chapter Four, “The Fabulous Fire-Fighting

Frogs of Chaldea.” Although not complete story-lines in and of themselves, these motifs nonetheless shed a great deal of light on the intertextual movement of information between the Islamic and Jewish contexts. Moreover, like the larger motifs, these mini-motifs retain importance as signifiers of the differing values of their traditions. Chapter Three discusses the issue of the infant patriarch’s sustenance while hidden from the murderous king and its relation to the “slain” Israelite boys of Egypt. Chapter Four addresses the matter of the frog at Ibrāhīm’s fiery furnace and her attempts to aid the patriarch by endeavoring to extinguish the flames. A comparison of this account with that of the midrashic frogs of the second plague in Egypt and with the fiery furnace narrative of the biblical book of Daniel reveals a complicated web of connections between the three episodes.

In essence, Chapter Five constitutes the culmination of the previous four chapters. “Abraham, Ibrāhīm, Moses and Muḥammad” investigates not only the fact of intertextual influence but also the all-important question of “why.” The main question addressed here asks *why* the Muslim and Jewish exegetical treatments of their shared patriarch vary so fundamentally, if subtly. As this chapter shows, the difference hearkens back largely to the Muslim understanding not of Ibrāhīm but of Islam’s most cherished prophet, Muḥammad.

Three appendices follow Chapter Five. The first consists of an undated Judeo-Spanish folk-song on the forefather’s birth and early life that includes numerous Islamic elements of his biography. The second appendix lists, in alphabetical order, the Islamic primary sources utilized in this work. Short identifications of the authors and/or their works are provided. The third appendix provides the same information for the Jewish sources. Short appendices on selected Jewish or Islamic texts also follow Chapters Two, Three, and Four. These allow the reader to follow the flow of the arguments better by providing the more complicated or important texts under discussion.

EXCURSUS

OVERVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP ON MUSLIM-JEWISH INTERTEXTUALITY

A. *Geiger and His Followers*

That both Judaism and Christianity influenced the development of Islam remains an incontrovertible fact, one attested by the Islamic sources themselves; the scholarly arguments center on the extent of the impact.⁸⁰ The major work on this topic begins with Abraham Geiger's 1833 *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?*⁸¹ in which Geiger endeavors to isolate unequivocal cases of exclusive Jewish influence on terms, concepts, and stories in the Qur'ān. Geiger does not consider the existence of parallel themes as conclusive proof of direct borrowing from Judaism but recognizes that many themes derived from common monotheistic ideas. Nonetheless, Geiger maintains that Muhammad consciously drew from the Jewish tradition, which he deliberately distorted, in order to authenticate his own message. In so insisting, Geiger often strains his evidence to prove direct Jewish influence.

Of the numerous scholars to follow Geiger in tracing the rabbinic matter in the Islamic exegetical material, among the most knowledgeable and sophisticated were Josef Horovitz in his *Koranische Untersuchungen* (1926) and Heinrich Speyer in *Die Biblischen Erzählungen im Quran* (1961). Horovitz investigated the relationship between Qur'ānic narratives and names and Biblical accounts and names; he prefaced his studies with a clear and in-depth presentation of the well-thought out rules and methods he used in engaging the material, both

⁸⁰ For example, Arthur Jeffrey, *Foreign Vocabulary of the Koran* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938; reprint, Lahore: Al-Biruni, 1977), especially the introduction.

⁸¹ English translation: *Judaism and Islam*, trans. F. M. Young (Madras: M. D. C. S. P. C. K. Press, 1898; reprint, New York: Ktav, 1970). Jacob Lassner presents a very thorough analysis of Geiger's work in "Abraham Geiger: A Nineteenth Century Jewish Reformer on the Origins of Islam," in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam*, ed. Martin Kramer (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and Asian Studies, 1999), 103–136.

conceptually and philologically.⁸² Speyer's equally scholarly work on the Biblical stories in the Qur'ān presents a thorough, though not complete, study of such characters as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Saul, David, Solomon, and others. Speyer also demonstrates the reappearance of post-Biblical Jewish characters in Qur'ānic guise, e.g. the Talmudic Ḥoni the Circle-Maker (*BT Ta'anit* 23a) who appears in Q 2:261. He furthermore traces certain Qur'ānic passages and concepts to Biblical and Talmudic sayings and ideas.⁸³

Numerous other scholars followed in Geiger's ground-breaking footsteps, noting that the narratives put forth by Muḥammad, or by the Islamic tradition generally, at times found their origins in Jewish materials. In *Muhammad als Religionsstifter* (1935), Karl Ahrens analyzed and traced the history of Muḥammad and his religious development as he came into contact with Judaism.⁸⁴ Gustav Weil studied the similarities between the Jewish traditions and the prophetic narratives of al-Kisā'ī and other similar sources in *The Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud* (1846).⁸⁵ Samuel Rosenblatt traced parallels between the Muslim and Jewish versions of the narratives of Adam, Abraham, Moses, and David.⁸⁶

Like Geiger, many of these scholars recognized that not every Islamic narrative element was traceable to a single earlier tradition and that care should be taken before declaring an element to be derivative. However, not all of Geiger's intellectual children were so careful, and a reductionist-oriented movement arose. Scholars began insisting that any narrative element shared by both Islam and Judaism could be traced back to Judaism, even when no evidence or textual support existed for such a move. In *The Jewish Foundations of Islam* (1933) for example, Charles Torrey posited the existence of a wholly undocumented 6th century Meccan Jewish rabbinic community from whom Muḥammad must have learned about Judaism and from whom

⁸² Josef Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1926); idem, "Jewish Proper Names and Derivatives in the Koran," *HUCA* II (1925): 145–227.

⁸³ Heinrich Speyer, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1961).

⁸⁴ Karl Ahrens, *Muhammad als Religionsstifter* (Leipzig: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1935).

⁸⁵ Gustav Weil, *The Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud* (London: Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1846).

⁸⁶ Samuel Rosenblatt, "Rabbinic Legends in Hadīth," *Muslim World* 35 (1945): 237–252.

Muhammad must have obtained his “legendary” information. In Torrey’s estimation, even what appears to be Christian influence in Islam actually traces back to a Jewish source; this undocumented Meccan Jewish community, he insisted, practiced a form of Christianity.⁸⁷ Adolph von Harnack recorded this same idea in his *Dogmengeschichte* (1922) when he wrote that Islam “recast the Jewish religion on Arab soil” after the Jewish religion had itself been recast by a gnostic Judaizing Christianity.⁸⁸ Mordechai Nisan recently presented a more moderated version of Torrey’s idea. He posits the existence of purposeful Meccan-era Jewish informers, although he does not suggest specifically that they dwelled in Mecca itself. These Jews, he submits, may have been responsible, either out of spite or ignorance, for some of the differences between normative Muslim practice and the Jewish practices on which they are consciously formulated, such as ‘ashūrā’ and *Yom Kippur*.⁸⁹

A particularly severe case of the reductionist attitude appears in Abraham Katsh’s *Judaism in Islam* (1954).⁹⁰ Katsh’s verse-by-verse analysis of *sūras* 2 and 3 of the Qur’ān links each Qur’ānic verse with a Biblical or Talmudic “source.” In his introduction, Katsh asserted that he intended to employ the same method for each and every *sūra* of the Qur’ān’s remaining 112 chapters. Despite his fervent belief that such an undertaking could be accomplished, he published no further studies of this type. A further example of the reductionist tendency appeared in the works of Julian Obermann, who asserted that Muhammad was a “diligent disciple of Aggadah turned into its inspired teacher and aggressive exponent.”⁹¹

Other authors similarly stressed the Jewish influence over Muslim elements small and large. For example, H. G. Reissner maintains

⁸⁷ Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Jewish Foundations of Islam* (New York: Jewish Institution of Religion Press, 1933).

⁸⁸ Adolph von Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte* II (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), 553.

⁸⁹ Nisan, “Note on a Possible Jewish Source for Muhammad’s ‘Night Journey,’” *Arabica* 47 (2000): 275.

⁹⁰ Abraham Katsh, *Judaism in Islam: Bible and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and its Commentaries* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1954).

⁹¹ Julian Obermann, “Koran and Aggadah: The Events at Mt. Sinai,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 58 (1941): 48. See also his “Islamic Origins: A Study in Background and Foundation,” in N. A. Faris, ed., *The Arab Heritage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 58–120.

that even the word *ummī*, traditionally understood by Muslims to indicate Muhammad's unlettered status, derives from an inner Jewish split regarding the educated classes, who were known as "Jews," and the ignorant masses of the lower classes, known as "'amei ha-arets/ *benei yisrael*."⁹² Among other things, A. S. Yahuda asserts that the Aramaic used by Muhammad derived from the Median Jews who were well acquainted with Aramaic from the targums and used it in their Arabic speech.⁹³ In *Les Origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les Vies des Prophètes* (1933), David Sidersky insists that prophetic account after prophetic account in al-Tabarī derives straight from the Talmud or other Jewish sources.⁹⁴

Elements of the reductionist attitude appear in the writings of even such formidable scholars as S. D. Goitein. Basing himself on an impressive breadth of knowledge and command of the materials, in *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts through the Ages* (1955) Goitein declared that even those Islamic stories which have no Jewish origin may still indicate some divergent Jewish tradition.⁹⁵ Indeed, Goitein maintained elsewhere, all elements of Muhammad's revelations could be traced to a religion that preceded him.⁹⁶ Goitein believed so strongly in the Jewish basis of all things Muslim that he, echoing Torrey, posited the existence of an Arabian Jewish group whom he named the "Bene Moshe." Using Muslim values as his guidelines, he claimed that the Bene Moshe constituted a pre-rabbinic group of Jews for

⁹² H. G. Reissner, "The Ummī Prophet and the Banū Isrā'īl," *The Muslim World* 39 (1949): 276–281. Although Reissner's theory is interesting, his claim that the Jewish community of around Muhammad's era made such a distinction in nomenclature signifying differences in adherence to Talmudic law—"Jew (*Yehudi*)" vs. "*Benei Yisrael*"—has no support. He himself does not bring any references either to the Talmud, in which he claims the distinction is made, or to later scholars commenting on the Talmudic era. While the rabbis did look down upon the ignorant masses and refer to them as 'amei ha-arets (lit. people of the land) they did not exclude them from the legal category or title of "Jew." If Muhammad intended himself to be understood as the "populist/popular prophet," rather than the "illiterate prophet," he could have used the word and concept independently of the influence of the Hebrew 'am ha-arets, which is not an exact cognate of the Arabic *ummī* ('am/עָם vs. *ummī*/عمي).

⁹³ "A Contribution to Qur'ān and Hadīth Interpretation" in *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume I*, ed. S. Löwinger and J. Somogyi (Budapest, 1948), 286–290.

⁹⁴ Sidersky, *Les Origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les Vies des Prophètes* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1933).

⁹⁵ S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts through the Ages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), 51–52.

⁹⁶ Goitein, "Mi Hayyu Rabbotav ha-Muvhaqim shel Muḥammad," *Tarbiz* 23 (1953): 146–159.

whom Moses was the central figure and whose prophet-centeredness inspired the format of Islam.⁹⁷ Goitein furthermore insisted that any Christian artifact in Islam could be traced back to these Jews, who were themselves influenced by Christian nazirite piety and borrowed some of its practices.⁹⁸ This brings to mind Cook and Crone's later claim that Islam began as a Jewish messianic movement in a gentile environment.⁹⁹

A more recent version of Goitein's important, insightful, and well-supported claim reappears in the writings of Andre Zaoui and David Halperin. In *Mekorot Yehudi'im ba-Kuran* (1983), Zaoui presents a chapter-by-chapter, verse-by-verse, analysis of the Qur'ān; for each verse, he gives a Jewish source, either a Biblical verse or a Talmudic or midrashic passage. Zaoui attributes even ideas which would logically be shared by all monotheisms—such as man's dependence on God for sustenance—to specific Jewish sources.¹⁰⁰ Halperin takes a somewhat different stance, stating that the Muslim transformation of originally Jewish materials constitutes not a uniquely Muslim take on the material but forms a profoundly accurate exegesis of the Jewish sources. The Muslim narrators, he insists, instinctively grasped the hidden and often psychological meanings of the Jewish texts and manipulated them in order to allow these Jewish meanings to move closer to the surface.¹⁰¹ Haim Schwarzbaum states similarly that some

⁹⁷ Goitein, *Jews and Arabs*, 58.

⁹⁸ Idem, 57. Shalom Goldman refutes this idea in the introduction to his *The Wiles of Women, the Wiles of Men: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish and Islamic Folklore* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), xv. Halperin and Newby tender a slightly altered version of Goitein's idea. They maintain that their analysis of a tradition transmitted by Ka'b al-Ahbār and its possible Jewish connection supports Hayim Rabin's suggestion that, side by side with rabbinic Judaism, there existed in 7th century Arabia a variety of Judaism more inclined to apocalypticism, not Christianity. It was this form of Judaism that "decisively influenced Muhammad's new religion." See David J. Halperin and Gordon Newby, "Two Castrated Bulls: A Study in the Haggadah of Ka'b al-Ahbār," *JAOS* 102: 4 (1982): 638.

⁹⁹ Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, *Hagarism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 74.

¹⁰⁰ Andre Zaoui, *Mekorot Yehudi'im ba-Kuran* [Jewish Sources of the Koran] (Jerusalem, 1983). See especially p. 179.

¹⁰¹ See David J. Halperin, "The Hidden Made Manifest: Muslim Traditions and the 'Latent Content' of Biblical and Rabbinic Stories," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, eds. David P. Wright, David N. Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Indiana: Eisenbraun's, 1995), 581–594; idem, "Can Muslim Narrative be Used as Commentary

old Jewish legends in the Talmudic-midrashic and later rabbinic literature can be reconstructed on the basis of preserved early Islamic patterns.¹⁰²

The emphasis of Western scholarship on tracing the sources of the Qur’ān and of Islam to an earlier monotheism is not restricted to Judaism, although it is in Islam’s relationship to Judaism that the current study lies. Contrary to Torrey and others, H. Z. Hirschberg maintains that the Qur’ān reflects Jewishly-marked Christianity, not Christian-influenced Judaism. This occurred, he explains, because the Christianity which influenced Islam was very Semitic.¹⁰³ Likewise, Tor Andrae and Julius Wellhausen insist that many of themes and characteristics of Islam—such as the fear of the Day of Judgment, fear as proof of piety, etc.—point to Islam’s reliance upon ascetic Christian piety.¹⁰⁴ Andrae characterizes the matter by saying that “Muhammad always maintained a certain predilection for this religion; this preference for Christianity, particularly in the presence of Judaism, lasted generally until the time of the Crusades. . . .”¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Richard Bell maintains that while the evidence of Christian influence is not as direct as that of Judaism, its effect on the atmosphere in which Islam took shape was of greater import. In *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (1926), he analyzes a number of Qur’ānic and *qīṣāṣ* references to show their similarity to and probable gene-

on Jewish Tradition?” *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations*, ed. Ronald Nettler (Oxford: Harwood Academic Publishers Institute, 1995), 73–88. See also Gordon Newby, “The Drowned Son: Midrash and Midrash Making in the Qur’ān and *Tafsīr*,” in *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions*, eds. William Brinner and Stephen Ricks (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 19–32.

¹⁰² See his *Biblical and Extra-biblical Legends in Islamic Folk Literature* (Walldorf-Hessen: Verlag für Orientkunde Dr. H. Vormdran, 1982), 45.

¹⁰³ H. Z. Hirschberg, “Sippure ha-Torah be-‘Arav ha-Qeduma,” [Stories of the Torah in Ancient Arabia], *Sinai* 18 (1946): 92–106.

¹⁰⁴ Tor Andrae, *Les Origines de l’Islam et le Christianisme* [Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum], trans. Jules Roche (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1955); idem, *Muhammad: The Man and his Faith*, trans. Theophil Menzel (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1935); Julius Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1897).

¹⁰⁵ “Mahomet a toujours conservé une certaine préférence pour cette religion; cette préférence pour le Christianisme, particulièrement en face du Judaïsme, dura en général jusqu’au temps des Croisades. . . .” In Andrae, *Les Origines*, 29. While not disparaging the Jewish influence on Islam, especially in the *qīṣāṣ* literature, Andrae maintains that the Islamic scriptures are more closely related to the Syrian churches than had been previously assumed.

sis from Christian tradition.¹⁰⁶ Years later, Claude Gilliot addressed the specific Qur'ānic issue of the foreign-speaking man who is said to have taught Muḥammad his religion. This charge appears in Q 16:103 where the Qur'ān refutes it: "Yet We know what they say: It is only a man who instructs him. The speech of the man they imply is obscure/foreign [اعجمي, *aḍjamī*] while this is clear Arabic." Gilliot explains this verse through the numerous reports in which Christian slaves are said to have influenced Muḥammad's absorption of religious ideas and information in one way or another. Gilliot concludes, "Is there anything astonishing about that, for the Arabian Peninsula before Islam and at the time of Muḥammad 'was not a closed box.' And, there is no *a priori* reason to doubt that Muḥammad might have spoken with slaves, and why not with Christian slaves."¹⁰⁷

B. New Scholarly Trends: Creative Appropriation

Recent scholarship has begun to present a more moderated view of the interaction between Islam and its monotheistic predecessors. While still acknowledging the importance of the Jewish tradition in the early development of Islamic narrative, scholars have shifted away from the *purely* reductionist standpoint. The newer perspective maintains that while the Islamic narrative tradition adopted elements from Judaism and Christianity, Islam consciously remolded and refashioned these cultural artifacts in its own image and according to its own values. In this, modern scholars reflect the teaching of H. A. R. Gibb who insisted that the absorption of foreign influences is a sign of the *vitality* of the absorbing religion or culture.¹⁰⁸ A prime example

¹⁰⁶ Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London: MacMillan and Company, 1926), 14–16 and 194ff. See also Bell, "Muhammad's Knowledge of the Old Testament," *Studia Orientalia* (Presentation Volume to William Barron Stevenson), ed. C. J. Mullo Weir (Glasgow: 1945), 2:1–20. Here Bell maintains that the idea of monotheism came to Muhammad due to Christian influence. The same is true, he relates, of the Old Testament materials, especially in the early years.

¹⁰⁷ "Quoi d'étonnant à cela, car le péninsule arabique avant l'Islam et à l'époque de Muhammad [sic] 'n'était pas une boîte fermée.' Et il n'y a pas de raison *a priori* de douter que Muhammad [sic] ait pu s'entretenir avec des esclaves, et pourquoi pas des esclaves chrétiens." Claude Gilliot, "Les 'informateurs' juifs et chrétiens de Muḥammad. Reponse d'un probleme traité par Aloys Sprenger et Theodor Nöldeke," *JSAI* 22 (1998): 118.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted by Hava Lazarus Yafeh in "Judaism and Islam: Some Aspects of

of the newer brand of scholarship appears in the writings of Reuven Firestone, who wrote of Islamic exegetical literature (1992),

. . . the academic approach tends toward reductionism, which has the effect of reducing the power of the legends to merely the sum of simple, even mediocre parts. It tends to ignore the great power—even sublimity—of the literature and the religious truths that legends such as these provide.¹⁰⁹

Despite the striking parallels between Islam and earlier religions, he asserts, the style and content of the Islamic versions suggest a distinct quality that sets them apart from Jewish and Christian legends.¹¹⁰ In his *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba* (1993), Jacob Lassner similarly insists that one accept the Jewish tradition as having influenced Muslim renderings of the biblical past only when there is “presumptive evidence of cultural borrowing,” that is, when there are actual, not hypothetical, texts available for comparison.¹¹¹ This principle was first noted by Geiger who, despite his own straining of the evidence, wrote that there were so many ideas common to the monotheistic traditions that one must be careful not to assert rashly that any familiar idea found in the Qur’ān must have been taken from Judaism. One must first prove that the idea in question sprang from a Jewish root, is in harmony with the Jewish spirit, and that apart from Judaism, the concept would lose importance and value.¹¹²

Similarly, F. E. Peters (1991) declares that the earlier reductionist approach explained only those influences operating on Muhammad. Problematically, they wholly ignored his impact on his environment.¹¹³

Mutual Cultural Influences,” in her *Some Religious Aspects of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), *passim*. Gibb’s laws on cultural interplay originally pertained to the Muslim influence on the European Renaissance. Lazarus Yafeh successfully applied them to the relationship between Judaism and Islam.

¹⁰⁹ Reuven Firestone, “Abraham: The First Jew or the First Muslim?” *CCAR Journal* 39, 1 (1992): 23.

¹¹⁰ Reuven Firestone, “Abraham’s Journey to Mecca in Islamic Exegesis: A Form-Critical Study of a Tradition,” *Studia Islamica* 76 (1992): 11.

¹¹¹ Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical and Medieval Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 123. Lassner continues to examine this phenomenon in “The ‘One Who Had Knowledge of the Book’ and the ‘Mightiest Name of God’: Qur’ānic Exegesis and Jewish Cultural Artifacts,” in *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations I*, ed. Ronald Nettler (Oxford: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993): 59–74.

¹¹² *Was hat Muhammad*, introduction, p. xxx, and p. 45.

¹¹³ F. E. Peters, “The Quest for the Historical Muhammad,” *IJMES* 23 (1991): 305.

More recently and more accurately, Brannon Wheeler (1998) has written that the Muslim exegetical commentaries were not necessarily interested in getting the original story straight. Instead, they strove to identify certain themes or motifs relevant to the Islamic message. The Islamic narratives are not a confusion of the earlier sources, he continues, but constitute the commentaries' purposeful interpretation and appropriation of certain motifs relevant to the context of the early Islamic community.¹¹⁴

Modern scholars have recognized Islam's creativity not only within the Islamic framework but also as it imprinted itself upon the Jewish realm. As the Islamic empire expanded across the Fertile Crescent in the 7th and 8th centuries, and later across North Africa and Andalusia, Jewish groups in the area, once disjointed, became unified. After suffering under the Byzantines for generations, Middle Eastern Jewry saw the Muslim invasions and conquests as messianic relief from persecution.¹¹⁵ Islamization gradually took over as Jews began assimilating Islamic modes of thought and patterns of behavior into their own culture. Even more significantly, arabization of the languages spoken by Jews began as Jews turned to Arabic as the language of communication even among themselves. This eventually led to an easier assimilation of non-Jewish Arabic texts, including the Qur'ān and Qur'ānic exegesis. Lassner points out that Jews adopted Muslim ideas and artifacts in a variety of areas, such as Jewish mysticism, Hebrew poetry, the sciences, and folklore. The Arabic tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*, he notes, were consumed by a highly receptive Jewish audience. Moreover, certain distinctively Muslim traditions appear to have become "common coin of the realm" as

¹¹⁴ Brannon Wheeler, "Moses or Alexander? Early Islamic Exegesis of Qur'ān 18:60–65," *JNES* 57 (1998): 215. Some other authors who similarly insist that Islam's "appropriation" of Jewish or Christian materials occurred hand in hand with a creative restructuring and Islamizing force include Marc S. Bernstein in *The Story of Our Master Joseph: Intertextuality in Judaism and Islam* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1992); Jacob Lassner, "The Covenant of the Prophets: Muslim Texts, Jewish Subtext," *AJSR* 15 (1990): 207–38; and Norman Stillman, "The Story of Cain and Abel in the Qur'ān and in the Muslim Commentators: Some Observations," *JSS* 19 (1974): 231–239. Other important works include Michael Lecker's *Muslims, Jews and Pagans: Studies in Early Islamic Medina* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995) and F. E. Peters' *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

¹¹⁵ Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), 22–23.

demonstrated by the numerous Jewish folktales written about the Muslim caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd.¹¹⁶ More surprisingly perhaps, Muḥammad's cousin and founder of the Shi'ite movement, 'Alī, and 'Alī's martyred sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, recur in Jewish literature for centuries, and not always in a negative light.¹¹⁷ Wasserstrom notes (n. 16) that among such 'Alīd artifacts to appear in the Jewish context is an ethical will of 'Alī to Ḥusayn preserved in Hebrew in the Cairo Geniza.¹¹⁸ Islamic ideas and sensibilities infiltrated into other arenas of Jewish culture and scholarship as well, from Hebrew grammar and philology to Jewish philosophy and thought.¹¹⁹ Lazarus Yafeh points out that medieval Judaism bore the stamp of Islam in almost every arena.¹²⁰

Importantly, scholars have also begun to acknowledge that the influence of Islam on Judaism reached even into the sphere of scriptural exegesis. An early form of this perspective still mixed with some reductionist tendencies appeared in the writings of Bernard Heller (1934). Heller maintains that although Islamic legends borrow abundantly from Jewish legends, they also lend. In Heller's view, the Islamic legends penetrated into the motives of the aggadah, expanding upon, extending, and sometimes even deepening it. Heller also

¹¹⁶ Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 136. For an in-depth analysis of the Muslim influence on medieval Hebrew poetry, see Raymond Scheindlin, *The Gazelle: Medieval Hebrew Poems on God, Israel and the Soul* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991); idem, *Wine, Women and Death: Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1986); Arie Schippers, *Spanish Hebrew Poetry and the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).

¹¹⁷ Steven M. Wasserstrom, "The Shī'is are the Jews of Our Community: An Interreligious Comparison with Sunnī Thought," *IOS* 14 (1994): 300.

¹¹⁸ A longer treatment of this document appears in S. D. Goitein's "Meeting in Jerusalem: Messianic Expectations in the Letters of the Cairo Geniza," *AJS Review* 4 (1979), 43–57. Jewish law and tradition mandates that one may not throw the written name of God in the garbage but must respectfully dispose of documents in which it appears. Thus, documents that are considered sacred or which bear the name of God are either buried or deposited in a depository constructed for that purpose, known as a *geniza*. The Cairo Geniza is the *geniza* of the Ben Ezra synagogue of Fustat (Old Cairo), founded in 882 CE and still standing today. Many of the documents that were preserved there—dating as far back as the 10th century—are not religious texts at all but are secular legal documents, letters, inventory lists, troussau lists, last wills and testaments and so on. Many are not even in Hebrew but Judeo-Arabic. For more on the Cairo Genizah, see S. D. Goitein's *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–1993), 6 vols.

¹¹⁹ Rosenblatt, "Rabbinic Legends," 251.

¹²⁰ Lazarus Yafeh, "Judaism and Islam," 83.

notes that in other instances the aggadah knows the Muslim legend and purposely controverts it.¹²¹

Jumping off from this, in his *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (1995), Steven Wasserstrom termed the two-directional give-and-take between the traditions a “synergy.” In the case of Judaism, he asserted, “we know that it was altered, root and branch, in its growth in the soil of Islamicate civilizations.”¹²² Indeed, the intrusion of Islam into the Jewish exegetical sphere should not be too surprising considering that the “heyday” of the post-Qur’ānic midrashic literature, as described by Salo Baron, dates to the period straddling the emergence of Islam as the dominant religious force across the Arabian region.¹²³ In other words, the high period of midrashic activity was one which overlapped chronologically and geographically with the initial Islamic centuries.

Lazarus Yafeh (1991) argued that there is no doubt that Jews, and Christians, were familiar with the Islamic religion as well as with its scriptures. Judeo-Arabic literature itself, she writes, testifies to this fact; the writings of medieval Jewish scholars such as the poet Moses ibn Ezra (d. after 1135 CE), the philosopher Netanel al-Fayyumi (d. 1165 CE), the rabbi-philosopher-physician-codifier of Jewish law Maimonides (d. 1204 CE), and the Karaite jurist and exegete al-Qirqasani (10th cent. CE) all display a familiarity with the Qur’ān, even quoting from it on occasion. One shocking display of Islamic influence appears in the Arabic translation of the Bible by Sa’adia Gaon (882–942 CE), head of the talmudic academy at Sura in Babylonia. Sa’adia translates פָרָה אֲדֻמָּה (*parah adumah*), the red heifer whose ashes are used to purify objects and people defiled by a corpse (Num. 19), as בָקָרָה צְפָרָה (*baqara sufra*), a yellow cow. Aside from the obvious discrepancy in color, one should note that the Arabic term employed by Sa’adia is the *Qur’ānic* designation for this very animal (Q 2:69). Intriguingly however, the *Qur’ānic* description conflates the Biblical red heifer with elements of another cow used

¹²¹ Bernard Heller, “The Relation of the Aggadah to Islamic Legends,” *Muslim World* 24 (1934): 281ff.

¹²² Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 181.

¹²³ Steven M. Wasserstrom, “Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Muslim Literature: A Bibliographical and Methodological Sketch” in *Tracing the Threads. Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha*, ed. John C. Reeves (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 87–114.

for purification from death, the עֲנָלָה עֲרֻפָה (*eglah ‘arufah*). This young bovine is an unworked, broken-necked heifer used in an expiatory ceremony when a corpse has been found equidistant from two towns and one cannot determine upon which town lies the guilt of the presumed murder (Deut. 21:1–9).¹²⁴ That a learned scholar and proficient translator such as R. Sa‘adiah would translate a Biblical term in accordance with such an obvious Qur’ānic reference, one which does not even match the Hebrew, demonstrates the extent of medieval Jewry’s familiarity with Islamic concepts and vocabulary.¹²⁵

This more moderated emerging scholarly perspective allows us to understand that a complex relationship, an intertwined connection, binds Islam and Judaism together. As more and more such scholarship comes to light, we will be better able to appreciate the beauty and vitality of the two traditions as they danced around and with each other to create the sophisticated messages so compelling to their adherents.

¹²⁴ Hava Lazarus Yafeh, “Al Yahas ha-Yehudim la-Kuran,” *Sefunot* 20 (1991): 39–40. For Sa‘adiah’s translation of the Bible, see *Keter Torah* (Jerusalem, 1893/4).

¹²⁵ In private conversation, Prof. Norman Golb has suggested that R. Sa‘adiah’s translation of the Hebrew *adumah* as the Arabic *sufra* may lie in his understanding of the word *adumah* to mean pale, and not actually red since a “red” cow seems a realistic impossibility. He maintains that *sufra*, a pale-ish yellow color, seems more realistic and likely. Prof. Golb’s idea echoes the explanation for R. Sa‘adiah’s color discordance given by R. Amram ben Yahya Korah (1871–1953), a writer and leader of Yemenite Jewry in San‘a. I have not, however, been able to find any translation or etymology of the word *adunah* that would support this idea. Nor have I been able to find any other Bible translators or commentators to suggest such a reading. Moreover, this explanation of R. Sa‘adiah’s logic does not detract from the fact that the precise wording R. Sa‘adiah chose for his translation is the very phrase that the Qur’ān uses to refer to a conflated version of this very same animal. R. Korah’s commentary on R. Sa‘adiah’s translation appears in the margins of *Keter Torah* (see n. 45, above) under the title *Neveh Shalom*.

CHAPTER ONE

PROPHECY AND THE PRE-NATAL PATRIARCH

The opening account of Abraham's biography follows the same general lines in both the Muslim and the Jewish tradition: in the days of old, the land of Chaldea and its idol-worshiping inhabitants were ruled by an idolatrous and haughty king by the name of Nimrod. Life proceeded along relatively peacefully until the day a prediction reached the ruler that a child born in his kingdom would eventually vanquish him religiously and overthrow him politically. Alarmed, Nimrod scrambled to prevent the prophecy's fulfillment and set elaborate plans to obliterate his competition. But all his designs and attempts came to nothing. The child grew up safely and soundly, away from the menacing eye of the king, and began his life in peace and security.

Any Muslim or Jewish schoolchild would recognize the above vague story as the beginning of the biography of Ibrāhīm and/or Abraham. Indeed, it is almost impossible to determine, based on the provided synopsis, if what appears above derives from an Islamic or midrashic text. The texts of either of the two traditions fit the given description perfectly, so similar are they. This symmetry strikes the reader as even more interesting when one notes that neither the Bible nor the Qur'ān makes even oblique reference to the story of Abraham's birth; yet both the Islamic and Jewish extra-Scriptural traditions narrate it in much detail.

According to scholars such as David Sidersky,¹ the remarkable similarities between the two religious traditions derive from Islam's reliance upon and mining of its elder sibling, Judaism. True to the reductionist style of his times, Sidersky assigns aggadic Jewish sources for *all* the recorded episodes in the life of Ibrāhīm, as well as other biblical personalities who play a role in the Islamic tradition. Specifically, he claims that the Islamic renditions of the forefather's

¹ Sidersky, *Les Origines*, 33–34.

entire life as told in the Qur’ān, as well as by extra-Qur’ānic writers like al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) and al-Kisā’ī (11th cent. CE), from Nimrod’s setting himself up as a divinity to the pre-natal prediction of Ibrāhīm and on through the fire of Chaldees, drew their information entirely (“est tirée entièrement”) from the Babylonian Talmud *Pesahim* 118a, the Yemenite *Midrash ha-Gadol* 11:28, and from *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* 28.² Sidersky thus attributes very little originality to the Islamic narratives and to early Islamic religious scholarship. Rather, as he sees it, in order to create their sacred history the Muslim exegetes, historians, and “aggadists” simply lifted their information from the Jewish sources.

However, when one turns to the Jewish sources that Sidersky quotes, one encounters serious problems with his claim and one realizes that it is, to some extent, false. *BT Pesahim*, *Midrash Ha-Gadol* and *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* do not support his argument as he asserts they do. *BT Pesahim* 118a, the earliest of Sidersky’s sources (closed, 6th cent. CE), concerns itself only with Gabriel’s intercession in and Abraham’s later redemption from the Chaldean fiery furnace. This most definitively pre-Islamic source makes no mention whatsoever of the pre-natal prediction or of Abraham’s birth in general. Likewise, the *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* passage does not address Abraham’s birth, or pre-birth, but meets him for the first time when he is already old enough to serve as a merchant in his father’s idol-shop.³

Of Sidersky’s three sources, only *Midrash ha-Gadol* includes a birth narrative for Abraham. Claiming this work as a pre-Islamic text that would definitively leave an imprint on the later Arabic material, as Sidersky insinuates, proves problematic. Scholars have noted that although *Midrash ha-Gadol* contains much from the early rabbinic period, before the rise of Islam, its Islamic-era redaction date and Yemenite origin preclude any claims of “purity” of material. This rings especially true for those themes for which no corroborating evidence from definitively pre-Islamic Jewish sources has remained,

² *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* does not have a 28th chapter and, in fact, ends at chapter 25, which is where this narrative appears. Most likely, Sidersky’s ט”ז (28) is a typographical error for ט”ז (25). See below, n. 3.

³ The date of composition for *Tanna de-bei Eliyahu*, the collective name for *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* and *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, is disputed. However, Strack and Stemberger maintain it likely dates to after the Babylonian Talmud (6th century CE) but before the 9th century CE. See Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 340–341.

as is the case at hand. This raises the possibility, even probability, that the Islamic sources on Abraham's birth did not draw from these later, post-Qur'ānic, Jewish sources but donated to them, as we shall presently see.

I. *Islamic Sources and the Pre-natal Patriarch*

A. *The Sibyllic Texts*

Almost all of the Islamic texts included in this study, when relating Ibrāhīm's biography in its entirety, recount the prophecy episode. Specifically, each relates that a prophecy reached the king which foretold the coming of a child, not yet conceived, who would overthrow him. While the message itself remains immutable throughout the texts, the Muslim authors provide four slightly diverging scenarios through which Namrūd learns of his future nemesis. The earlier exegetes relate that the prophecy was delivered by either a fortune-telling priest or the royal astrologers—among whom sat the unknowing Azar, Ibrāhīm's father.⁴ In later works, the king himself dreams a mystifying dream which, according to his royal advisors, signifies the coming of Ibrāhīm and his religion-smashing ways. Other scenarios depict the king's vision not as a dream but in real-time, with the same frightening interpretation. Though the vehicle through which the message is delivered varies among the different authors, in each case and in each version one major element remains unvaryingly constant: the child who will turn Namrūd's world on its head is soon to be conceived.

The *tafsīr* of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (c. 713–767 CE) provides the earliest Islamic account of the pre-conception prophecy motif. According to Muqātil,⁵ Namrūd the Tyrant (*al-jabbār*) received a prophecy from fortune-telling priests (كاهنة, *kahana*) that told of the impending birth of a boy who would change the idolatrous religion of the kingdom and would destroy Namrūd's people. Namrūd attempted to circumvent the prophecy and child's conception by immediately segregating all the men in his kingdom from the women. Over every 10 men,

⁴ Aka Tārakh or Tārah (Teraḥ). Throughout the discussion, I will refer to him according to the name used in the specific source quoted.

⁵ Muqātil, 1:569–573 on Qur'ān 6:74–82.

he appointed a guard whom he commanded to prohibit contact between men and women while the women were in their pure, non-menstrual state. He permitted only menstruating women, both ritually impure and physically much less likely to conceive, to be approached by their husbands. Realizing that such a plan might prove ineffectual regarding those women already pregnant, Namrūd also ordered his guards to kill all boy babies born in the kingdom that year. In a move which Muqātil does not detail or explain, Azar gained access to his wife one night while she was in her pure state and lay with her. That very night the priests returned to Namrūd to update him and informed him that the child whose future existence he tried so hard to circumvent had been conceived.⁶

A corresponding account involving a medium appears in the *Qisāṣ al-anbiyā'* of the similarly early Ishāq ibn Bishr (d. 821 CE).⁷ Here too a prophecy of Ibrāhīm's impending birth and rebellious nature, along with the king's attempts to annihilate him, precedes his actual conception. After Namrūd had consolidated and strengthened his rule over the people who now worshiped him, relates Ishāq ibn Bishr, "it was reported to him" that a child would be born in his kingdom who would plunder and destroy all Namrūd had set up. Needing more information, Namrūd called for the "best of his people," among whom sat Azar the (future) father of Ibrāhīm, and ordered them to "deflower a palm tree." Through this divination, whose exact mechanics remain unclear to the modern reader, Namrūd hoped to learn into whose lot the child would fall so that he could be found and destroyed. As a kindness from Allah on behalf of Ibrāhīm, the name of the goddess whom the king worshiped, rather than the name of

⁶ The modern editor of this work brands this episode, from the patriarch's birth through his weaning, *isrā'īliyyāt* and claims that no *isnād* (chain of transmission) exists for it either in the Qur'ān or in the sunna (p. 570, n. 2). However, other *mufassirūn* (exegetes) provide *asānīd*. Among others mentioned below, see also Muḥammad Baqīr al-Majlīsī (d. 1698 CE), *Bihār al-anwār* (Teheran: Dār al-kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1362–1366 AH [1943–1946]), 12:29–30 [Abū Sa'wān—Ibn Miskān—Abū 'Abdallāh].

⁷ Ishāq ibn Bishr, *Qisāṣ al-anbiyā' wa-mubtada' al-dunyā*, MS Huntington 338, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, 160b–162a. Ishāq ibn Bishr served as the source for the later Ibn 'Asākir (1105–1176 CE) who quotes this version almost verbatim and attributes it to Ibn Bishr. See Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh madīnat Dimashq*, 6:167ff. This version also appears in al-Majlīsī, 11:87, and in Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Tha'labī (d. 1035 CE), *Qisāṣ al-anbiyā' al-musamma 'arā'is al-majālis* (Cairo: Matba'at al-anwār al-Muhammadiyya, n.d.), 86. Regarding those who reported to Namrūd, al-Tha'labī adds, "It is said that they found such information in the books of the prophets."

the sought-after baby, appeared in Azar's lot. The attendant company interpreted this to mean that the goddess favored Azar above all and negative attention was deflected away from Ibrāhīm's father. Sometime later, Amīla, Azar's wife, became pregnant. Cognizant of the king's deadly plan and of her husband's social proximity to the throne, she plotted a ruse. She proposed to her husband that they raise the child and give him over to the king only later, as a gesture of fealty and in hopes of thereby suspending the death sentence imposed upon baby boys. Ibn Bishr adds that Amīla never had any true intention of giving up her child to the king. When her due date drew near, Amīla claimed she feared death and sent her husband to the idol to pray for her. She gave birth alone, hid the baby, and told her husband the baby had died.⁸

Other sources tell of astrologers, rather than priests, who predict Ibrāhīm's birth. Though the heralds differ, both the content and the timing of the prediction remain the same. Much like Muqātil's priest and Ishāq ibn Bishr's prophet, well before conception the astrologers read in the stars of Ibrāhīm's impending appearance. According to al-Mas'ūdī (896–956 CE), during the lifetime of Azar and the rule of Namrūd, people began to read the stars and developed the science of astrology.⁹ It was then that the astrologers looked into the skies and discerned the rising of the year in which Ibrāhīm would be born. The stars also revealed what would subsequently occur—Ibrāhīm's deprecation of their dreams and mockery of their worship. The astrologers quickly reported their findings to the king who decreed death for all boys to be born in his kingdom.¹⁰

⁸ Ishāq ibn Bishr, 162a.

⁹ Al-Ya'qūbī asserts that people began reading the skies during the reign of Namrūd who was himself taught by a man named Nabtaj. See Ahmad ibn Abī Ya'qūb al-Ya'qūbī (d. 897 CE), *Ta'rikh Ahmad ibn Abī Ya'qūb ibn Ja'far ibn Wahab ibn Wādīh al-mārif bi-al-Ya'qūbī*, ed. M. Th. Houtsma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 20. Al-Kisā'ī (p. 132) places Idrīs in this role. Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 CE) attributes the establishment of this science to Namrūd himself. See 'Abdallāh ibn Mūsīm, *Kitāb al-mārif*, ed. Muḥammad Ismā'īl 'Abdallāh al-Sāwī (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-Islāmiyya, 1934), 15–16.

¹⁰ 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Mas'ūdī, *Muṭūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhār*, ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut: Publications de L'Université Libanaise, 1966–1974), 1:48 (Para. 75). See also al-Ya'qūbī, p. 20 and al-Majlīsī, 12:18–19. Al-Majlīsī notes that some exegetes and historians attribute the prediction to the “books of the prophets” (*kutub al-anbiyā'*). Al-Tha'labī (86–87) likewise explains that some people, whom he neglects to name or categorize, maintain that the astrologers and priests learned of Ibrāhīm by reading these same books.

Al-Ṭabarī (838–923 CE),¹¹ quoting Ibn Ishāq, takes this story-line one step further. The astrologers’ calculations reveal to them not only that a child would be born, the exact month and year of his birth, that he would be born in Namrūd’s country, that he would abandon Namrūd’s religion and destroy the king’s idols, but the calculations also reveal his name and, thus, his exact identity. “We have learned through our science,” they report to the king, “that a boy will be born in your land who will be called Ibrāhīm . . .”¹² Despite this very specific information, Namrūd takes no chances and prepares for the child’s arrival. At the beginning of the year in which Ibrāhīm is scheduled to be born, Namrūd imprisons every one of the realm’s pregnant women. During the month of Ibrāhīm’s foretold birth, Namrūd commands his officers to slaughter all newborn boys. Only Ibrāhīm’s mother escapes imprisonment; her pregnancy had remained undetectable to the eye for the entire nine months. During the month of slaughter, she runs off to a cave near her house and gives birth to her son in secret.

In some cases, the “astrologers” who read of Ibrāhīm’s impending existence in the stars are none other than Azar himself. In his capacity as the royal astrologer, Azar approaches Namrūd one day with a troubling reading; a “man” will soon be born, he relates, who will abolish the current religion and replace it with another. Namrūd demands clarification of the matter, which Azar provides: yes, confirms the royal star-watcher, the man will be born in this country but no, he has very definitely not “come to the world” yet. Namrūd quickly institutes his male-female segregation plan, hoping thereby to prevent the rebel from being conceived. Royal decree and plan notwithstanding, Azar’s wife subsequently becomes pregnant with Ibrāhīm, a fact she conceals successfully from her husband even after having given birth.¹³ Like al-Mas‘ūdī’s astrologers and Muqātil’s priests, the astrologer (here, Azar) learns of Ibrāhīm’s birth and activities even before the child is conceived, though he does not comprehend his

¹¹ Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-nuṣūl wa-al-mulūk*, 1:234–235 (1/254–5); idem, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl ay al-Qur’ān*, (Cairo: Sharikat maktabat wa-maṭba‘at Muṣṭafa al-Bābī al-Halabī wa-awlādihī, 1954), 7:248–9.

¹² Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 7:248; idem, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:234 (1/254).

¹³ Al-Majlisī, 12:29–30, 41–42. See also Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. 919 CE), *Tafsīr al-Qummī* (Najaf: Matba‘at al-Najaf, 1386–87 AH [c. 1967]), 1:206–7.

own role in the matter. Along with his king and unborn son, Azar is merely a pawn in the hands of divinely-ordained destiny.

Among the numerous versions of the account are those which dispense altogether with the middleman. In these cases, Namrūd himself witnesses the sign of ill tidings. Quoting “other than Ibn Ishāq,” al-Ṭabarī tells of a star that rose over Namrūd that was so bright, it blotted out both the sun and the moon. Frightened by such an unnatural occurrence, Namrūd called his magicians, soothsayers, prognosticators, and physiognomists for help. They explained that a boy would be born in Namrūd’s domain whose destiny it would be to destroy both the king and his rule. Now at the time, records al-Ṭabarī, Namrūd was living in Babylon. And so, he gathered the men-folk together and with them left Babylon for another city, forcing the women to remain behind. By leaving the women outside his “domain,” he hoped to avert the fulfillment of the prophecy; if no women lived under his control, it appears he reasoned in true semantic fashion, no children could be born under his control. Just to be sure, however, he ordered that any boys born to the town-bound women be slain. His plan to avert destiny might have worked, for the child had not been conceived yet, al-Ṭabarī (or his source) informs us. However, a task arose in the old town and Namrūd sent his trusted servant Azar back home to attend to the matter. Azar swore his allegiance to his king and swore he would not approach his wife. However, when he laid eyes on her, Azar found he could not control himself. Ibrāhīm’s mother conceived him that very night.¹⁴ Though Namrūd had hoped to derail Allah’s plans, when he sent Azar back into town the idolatrous king directly aided in their fulfillment and, like Oedipus’ unfortunate parents, ultimately facilitated his own demise.

Al-Tha’labī (d. 1036 CE), trusted amongst the *quṣṣāṣ* by the orthodox scholars for his adherence to normative tradition and avoidance of the fantastic, relates a similar account on the authority of al-Suddī (d. 744 CE), altering only a few details. According to al-Tha’labī, Namrūd’s vision of the powerful rising star occurred in a dream,

¹⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:236 (1/257–8); ‘Abd al-Rahman Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (1445–1515 CE), *al-Durr al-manthūr bi-l-tafsīr bi-l-ma’thūr* (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘a al-munīriyya, 1314 AH [1896/7]), 3:25. Al-Majlisī tells a similar story in the name of al-Suddī, though he does not include the trip out of town. See al-Majlisī, 12:18–19.

not in reality, and was interpreted as signifying the impending arrival of a religiously and politically rebellious child. Once again we read of Namrūd's attempts to avert the actualization of the prediction, since the child had not yet been conceived. The "Tyrant" ordered the slaughter of every boy born in that region that year and separated the men from the women, allowing them to meet only while the women were ritually impure and thus not permitted to engage in sexual relations. Namrūd foiled his own plans when he sent Azar home one evening on an unnamed mission. Finding his wife in her pure state and irresistible, Azar violated his oath to his regent to avoid her and he lay with her; that very night she became pregnant. Al-Tha'labī records that Ibn 'Abbās added that when Ibrāhīm's mother became pregnant, the priests returned to Namrūd. The conception which you had feared, they informed him, occurred this very night. Though the child would not arrive for another nine months, Namrūd ordered the slaughter of all boys born from that day on.¹⁵

Al-Kisā'ī (11th cent. CE), whose *Qisas al-anbiyā*¹⁶ ranks as the most fantastic and varied of the sources on the topic, likewise maintains that Namrūd dreamed portent-filled dreams about the as-yet unborn threat to his kingdom and religion. In one such dream stood a man with the sun in his right hand, the moon in his left, and all the stars in between. As Namrūd gazed upon him, the man commanded him to worship the Lord of heaven and earth, a command that startled the king awake. Namrūd succeeded in nodding off again, only to dream this time that he saw a beam of light in which a nation ascended and descended; standing among them was one man to whom the nation continuously paid homage.¹⁷ When he awoke,

¹⁵ Al-Tha'labī, 86–87. The motif of Namrūd-as-prognosticator appears in a truncated form in the earlier Ishāq ibn Bishr, 163b–164. Ishāq ibn Bishr emphasizes the arrival of the prophecy to the king well before the child's arrival. He does not reveal from whence Namrūd received his information; see also Ibn 'Asākir, 6:170–171.

¹⁶ Muhammad ibn 'Abdallāh al-Kisā'ī, *Vita Prophetarum auctore Muhammad ben Abdallah al-Kisā'ī*, ed. Isaac Eisenberg (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1922). For an in-depth discussion of the possibility of dating al-Kisā'ī and his works to other than the 11th century, see Aviva Schussman, *Sippurei ha-Nevi'im ba-Masoret ha-Muslemit, bi-'Ikar al-*pi* Qisas al-Anbiya shel Muhammad ibn Abdallah al-Kisā'ī* [Stories of the Prophets in the Muslim Tradition, mainly on the basis of 'Kisas al-Anbiya' by Muhammad b. 'Abdallah al-Kisā'ī] (Ph.D. dissertation, Jerusalem, Hebrew University, 1984 (1981)). See also Appendix B.

¹⁷ This echoes the Biblical account of Jacob's dream in which angels ascended to and descended from the heavens on a mysterious ladder. See Genesis 28:10.

Namrūd called for an interpretation. The soothsayers translated: a child will be born of those closest to the king and will inherit all the earth, but he will take over without the use of weapons. Understanding “closeness” as kinship, Namrūd immediately slit his own father’s throat and, as insurance, placed all the pregnant women of the kingdom under watch in order to ensure that no male-child lived.¹⁸ When told that despite the vividness of his dream the child had not yet been conceived, he temporarily halted the slaughter.¹⁹

Al-Kisā’ī includes a number of additional pre-conception dreams that are comfortingly but falsely dismissed in the morning by the royal courtiers. In one, two white birds approach Namrūd and speak to him. Tārakh,²⁰ when called to interpret, dismisses the matter and claims they are nothing but two rebellious genii. In another, Namrūd dreams of a bright-eyed man clothed in two white garments who plucks out the king’s right eye. The advisors assure the monarch that he merely has a case of indigestion and should consider the dream of no consequence; to each other, however, they acknowledge it is a sign of Namrūd’s impending downfall. In yet another scenario, Namrūd dreamed he saw the moon rise from Tārakh’s loins and cast a great light. In the morning Tārakh allayed the king’s fears, assuring him it indicated merely that he (Tārakh) was like the moon because of his great devotion to the idols. Finally, al-Kisā’ī reports that while napping on the throne one afternoon, Namrūd dreamed he saw green branches covered with grapes and other fruits growing from Tārakh’s loins.²¹

Al-Kisā’ī includes only one account in which Namrūd dreams of Ibrāhīm *after* the child has been conceived. This account, which utilizes a slightly altered version of the *shahāda*, the Muslim declaration of faith, finds no corresponding versions in any of the earlier or later Islamic or Jewish literature surveyed. Rather, this pre-annunciation

¹⁸ Logically, he should have kept a better eye on those closest to him socially, such as the courtiers, among whom sat Azar, and should have forgotten about ALL the women of the kingdom. Al-Kisā’ī’s work is not known for its stringent adherence to logic. On the other hand, Namrūd’s behavior does stress the cruelty often traditionally associated with idolatry.

¹⁹ Al-Kisā’ī, 126–128.

²⁰ Al-Kisā’ī consistently refers to Ibrāhīm’s father by this name and does not use the more common Islamic usage, Azar.

²¹ Al-Kisā’ī, 125–126.

placement of Ibrāhīm’s conception remains unique to these accounts in al-Kisā’ī. Nine months after Ibrāhīm’s mother conceived, he relates, Namrūd dreamed of a smokeless fire descending from heaven. As it approached him, the fire commanded him to repeat the phrase “There is no god but Allah and Ibrāhīm is the messenger of Allah.”²² If he resisted, the fire threatened, it would promptly incinerate him. Namrūd refused to comply and was summarily scorched. Upon awakening in the morning, he reported the vision to his astrologers. They recognized it as foreshadowing the birth of a baby who would overturn Namrūd’s dominion and religion, and advised him to slaughter all boys born in the kingdom. Finding the words of his astrologers appealing, Namrūd implemented the deadly plan.²³

Despite the various methods through which the prophecy reaches Namrūd, the timing and content of the message remain constant. The variations mentioned do not signify any relevant philosophical, moral, historical, or religious differences. One form carries more dramatic effect (Azar, the father of the child, unknowingly informs the king of his arrival or, alternatively, is the one person trusted enough not to violate the promise which he alone then violates). Another fits certain accepted ‘historical’ circumstances (astrology began in the period preceding Ibrāhīm’s birth, under Namrūd’s rule); or, the narrative follows the pattern of the folk-hero biography evident in the biographies of other religious renegades (Namrūd dreams of Ibrāhīm just as Pharaoh dreamed of Moses, or, astrologers inform Namrūd of baby Ibrāhīm just as Zoroastrians reading the skies informed Herod of Jesus).²⁴ In the end, how the prophecy reached Namrūd and what form it took—prophecy to a professional seer, brilliant star in the sky, dream, or astrological reading—remains of secondary importance when compared with its content and timing: according to the extra-Qur’ānic Islamic tradition regarding the birth of the forefather Ibrāhīm, it had been determined from on high before the child had been conceived that he would soon be born, overthrow the kingdom, vanquish the king, and institute a new religion.

²² Cf the *shahāda*, “There is no God but Allah and Muḥammad is the messenger of Allah.”

²³ Al-Kisā’ī, 129.

²⁴ For Moses’ birth, see below. On the biblical annunciation of Jesus to Herod, see *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, in *The Holy Bible* (King James Version) (New York: Meridian Books, 1974), chapter 2.

B. Exceptions to the Rule: *Mujāhid* and *Ibn Qutayba*

Only two of the Islamic sources surveyed in which one would expect to find mention of the pre-natal prophecy omit completely any allusion to this early miraculous episode in Ibrāhīm’s life. Interestingly, the first of the two is the *tafsīr* of the Meccan Mujāhid ibn Jabr (c. 641–722 CE), the earliest of the available Muslim exegetes.²⁵ Mujāhid’s account was followed in kind by the slightly later *Kitāb al-ma‘ārif* of Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 CE). Both Mujāhid and Ibn Qutayba’s omissions are especially puzzling in light of the wealth of Ibrahimic information that they otherwise include.

While Mujāhid addresses all the other episodes typically associated with Ibrāhīm’s early life—his discovery of God, his religious polemics with Namrūd, his smashing of the idols, and his safety while in the fire—he excludes any reference to the prediction of his birth. One might attribute this to the fact that this is also the one episode that does not appear in the Qur’ān itself. Mujāhid’s work is, after all, Qur’ānic exegesis and where the Qur’ān remains silent, one could expect an exegete to exhibit a measure of reticence as well. However, other reliable Qur’ānic exegetes, among them all those mentioned above, **do** include the annunciation narrative and with nary a concern for its extra-Qur’ānic nature. One might posit alternatively that Mujāhid did not consider prophetic birth-predictions to constitute valid religious themes and values and so he purposely excluded such motifs from his work. Yet, he recounts a similar episode concerning the later prophet Mūsā whose birth, Mujāhid relates freely, was preceded by prophetic predictions.²⁶ Why then does Mujāhid remain silent regarding this basic element of the patriarch’s biography? Could Mujāhid have been unaware of such a motif regarding Ibrāhīm?

Like Mujāhid, Ibn Qutayba provides a wealth of information regarding other aspects of the patriarch’s early life but not on his

²⁵ Mujāhid ibn Jabr, *Tafsīr al-imām Mujāhid ibn Jabr*, ed. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salām Abū al-Nīl (Cairo: Dār al-fikr, 1989). Some scholars theorize that Mujāhid’s *tafsīr* actually belongs to his master and the forefather of the Abbasid dynasty, Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 687 CE). If this proves true, the work could be even earlier than assumed. See Isaiah Goldfeld, “The *Tafsīr* of ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abbās,” *Der Islam* 58 (1981): 125–135.

²⁶ Mujāhid, 522. We will return to the parallels with the birth of Moses later on in this chapter.

birth. Unlike Mujāhid, Ibn Qutayba did not write his work as exegesis and therefore it does not follow the traditional format of a work of *tafsīr*. Rather, Ibn Qutayba's study comprises a chronologically ordered biographic-encyclopedic work of historic/religious figures important to the Muslim reader and believer. In discussing Ibrāhīm,²⁷ Ibn Qutayba refers to Ibrāhīm's genealogy, his generous and unique personality, and his fame as the “first” in a number of areas (the first to serve a dish of sopped bread, meat, and broth known as *tharīd*; the first to cut his moustache, circumcise himself, trim his nails;²⁸ the first to sport white hair). As regards Ibrāhīm's early biography, Ibn Qutayba includes the patriarch's religious polemic with the star worshiping Namrūd, as well as Ibrāhīm's divine rescue from the fiery furnace. The motif of an oracle that predicts Ibrāhīm's birth, so basic and familiar to us from the other Muslim sources, stands conspicuously absent. Ibn Qutayba makes not even an indirect allusion to such an occurrence nor to any sort of extraordinary circumstances regarding the patriarch's beginning. In light of the very prominent place given to the oracle in other Islamic sources, as well as the thorough treatment Ibn Qutayba himself affords Ibrāhīm's life-story, the omission becomes particularly glaring and begs our attention.

Though initially surprising, it is not all that coincidental that the very two Islamic sources to lack the prophetic episode are the very two that exhibit the closest links to the earlier Jewish tradition. Mujāhid, a Meccan whose life spanned the first Islamic century, remains the earliest of the Islamic exegetes whose works have survived to the present. He lived and worked in a period in which it was common practice among the Muslim community to rely on Jewish material regarding biblical figures in order to build the Islamic corpus. He himself is said to have studied under Ibn ‘Abbās, a man often associated with the transmission of *isrā’īliyyāt* and Israelite materials. *Hadīth* accounts from that period which encourage such bor-

²⁷ Ibn Qutayba, 15–16.

²⁸ The idea of Ibrāhīm as the first in moustache trimming, circumcision, nail trimming, etc. derives from the *hadīth*. See al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, 12:7, 56, and 14:462; M. J. Kister, “Pare Your Nails: A Study of an Early Tradition,” *JNES* 11 (1979): 63–70; idem, “. . . and he was born circumcised . . .” Some notes on circumcision in *hadīth*,” *Oriens* 1994: 10–30.

rowing of Jewish materials are well-known.²⁹ Ibn Qutayba, for his part, informs his reader from the very beginning that he utilized the Jewish “*al-Tawrāh*” as one of his major sources. When Muslim authors refer to *al-Tawrāh*, the Torah (Bible), they usually mean not only the Five Books of Moses, but a melange of the entire Hebrew Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, midrash, and anything else in the scholarly Jewish corpus.³⁰ In line with this tendency, Ibn Qutayba’s *Tawrāh* quotes mix actual Torah passages with midrashic elements. His other admitted major source, the Yemenite Wahb ibn Munabbih, was one of the earlier known converts to Islam. A compiler of *akhbār* (reports) and *qīṣāṣ* (stories, legends) who lived in the first Islamic century (7th–8th cent. CE), Wahb was known for his familiarity with the books of the ancients, particularly the *isrā’iliyyāt*.³¹ Perhaps this last fact served as the impetus for the scholarly opinion that maintains Wahb joined Islam only after leaving Judaism.³² It is curious that the two sources closest to the Jewish tradition both exclude the prophecy of Ibrāhīm’s birth. With this in mind, we turn now to the Jewish texts for a look at how they approached and treated the motif of Abraham’s prediction.

²⁹ See Kister, “*Haddithū*,” 215–239.

³⁰ In fact, Muslim authors seem completely ignorant of the existence, nature, and significance of the separate elements, a distinction so crucial to the Jewish mind.

³¹ Abbott, “Wahb b. Munabbih,” 103–112; Bernard Chapira, “Légendes bibliques,” 86–107; A. A. Duri, “The Beginnings of Historical Folklore: Wahb ibn Munabbih” in *The Rise of Historical Writing Among the Arabs*, trans. Lawrence Conrad (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1983), 122–136; Khoury, *Wahb ibn Munabbih*; Raif Georges Khoury, ed. *Les légendes prophétiques dans l’Islam: Depuis le Ier jusqu’au III^e siècle de l’Hégire (Kitāb bad’ al-khalq wa-qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’)* (Weisbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1978), 158–185; M. J. Kister, “On the Papyrus of Wahb b. Munabbih,” *BSOAS* 37, 3 (1974): 545–571; Heller, “The Relation of Aggadah,” 92; Hirschberg, “Sippurei ha-Torah,” 92–106; *EI*², s.v. “*Isrā’iliyyāt*” by G. Vajda (4:211–212); H. T. Norris, “Fables and Legends in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times” in *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. Alfred Beeston et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 374–386.

³² Hirschberg, 96 and Chapira, 92. According to Ernst Algermissen, the content of Ibn Qutayba’s Wahb citations seem to be enlarged translations of Pentateuch chapters in the style of the Aramaic targums. See his *Die Pentateuchzitate Ibn Hazms* ([Munster], 1933).

II. Post-Biblical Jewish Sources and the Pre-natal Prophecy

A. The Pre-Islamic Midrashic Relation to the Islamic Sources

Since the prophecy of Abraham's birth looms so large in the Islamic textual psyche, one would expect to find similar themes in the post-biblical pre-Islamic corpus of biblical narrative expansions. After all, as has already been discussed,³³ many of the Islamic narratives regarding biblical figures reflect the influence of the older Jewish (midrashic) literature. Additionally, there could hardly be another figure more venerated and admired by *both* traditions than Abraham, biological and spiritual patriarch of them equally. It follows then, that there could hardly be another narrative figure more likely to display evidence of Islamic-Jewish shared traditions. What we find in one corpus concerning this most basic, important, and shared of patriarchs, one would logically expect to find in its cousin tradition.

Aside from the fact that many midrashic accounts pre-date the Islamic sources and that Abraham is a key figure in Judaism as in Islam, there exists an additional reason to posit pre-Islamic Jewish inspiration for the Islamic narrative of Ibrāhīm's birth. Specifically, nothing explicitly *Islamic* or *Arab* in the Islamic narrative indicates a definitive Islamic origin for the motif. When it 'borrows' from the Jewish (or Christian) corpus, the Islamic tradition often refashions the narratives to fit Islamic or Arab values, purposes, and even relevant Muslim geography.³⁴ For example, the biblical site of the binding of Abraham's son moves from the land of Canaan to the Islamically significant Ka'ba in Mecca. Similarly, the biblical Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael out of his house to wander in the wilderness of Beersheba, in the Land of Israel (Gen. 21); Islamic traditions relocate their experiences to the hills of Sāfa and Marwa and the well of Zamzam.³⁵ In the case of Ibrāhīm's birth, however, the Islamic texts do not provide any specifically Arab or Muslim markings that would stamp the episode as uniquely and obviously Islamic in nature. Rather, the Muslim authors follow the Biblical text of Gen. 11:26–32

³³ See above, Introduction.

³⁴ This tendency has also been noticed by Firestone in his *Journeys in Holy Lands*, especially 13, 16 and by Lassner in his *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, especially 93–102.

³⁵ See, for example, al-Tabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, 1:250–2 (1/275).

closely and locate Ibrāhīm's birthplace in Chaldea. Similarly, the vocabulary of the Muslim versions echoes that of the Hebrew Bible. Genesis 10:9 calls Nimrod “mighty in hunting (נִבּוֹר צַיִד) *gibbor tza-yid*³⁶ before the Lord.” Time and again the Islamic sources use a word constructed from the Arabic cognate جَبَر (jbr) of this Hebrew root נִבּוֹר (gbr), to refer to Namrūd; in his capacity as ruler of the land in which Ibrāhīm was born, Namrūd appears as الْجَبَّار (al-jabbār), “The Tyrant.”³⁷ Even the Arabic proper names of the major characters, Ibrāhīm and Namrūd, retain the flavor of the biblical appellations Abraham (Avraham) and Nimrod.³⁸ Although Ibrāhīm's father appears in the Islamic texts mainly by his Qur'ānic appellation, Azar, not the Biblical Teraḥ, the majority of the texts maintain that Azar was merely the man's nickname; his proper name, they explain, was Tārah—the obvious Arabic pronunciation of the Hebrew.³⁹ Rather than signifying any distinctive Muslim context, all indicators point

³⁶ “One who is mighty.” S.v. “גִּבּוֹר” in Brown, Driver and Briggs, 150.

³⁷ S.v. “جَبَر”: form V, “to behave proudly, haughtily, or insolently.” See Edward W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1865), 2:373–374, see especially under “جَبَرية.” Interestingly, while the Arabic root carries a negative flavor, the Hebrew word “נִבּוֹר” (*gibbor*) does not. In fact, the Bible and the midrash often use this word to refer to God, as in Deut. 10:17, Neh. 9:32, Isaiah 10:21, and Jer. 32:18.

³⁸ In the Bible, Abraham's mother is unnamed. The Talmud (*BT Baba Batra* 91a) names her Emetlai bat Karnabo. Some of the Islamic sources echo this. Al-Ṭabarī (*Ta'rikh*, 1:310) forms 3 names: Tūtā bt. Karīna (according to the editor, read: Karnaba), Anmūtā from the children of Ephraim, and Anmatala bt. Yakfūr or Nakfūr. Ibn 'Asākir (6:168–171) also refers to her as Anmatala bt. Yakfūr, as well as Nūna bt. Karnabo, Abiyūna or Anmūtā from the children of Ephraim, and Amīla. Ishāq ibn Bishr (p. 161b) likewise refers to her as Amīla. I suspect that this rendition may be intentionally reminiscent of Muhammad's mother's name, Āmīna.

³⁹ تَرَه (Teraḥ). Numerous scholars have grappled with the origin and etymology of the name Azar. According to Abraham Geiger, the name is “completely explained” when we consider that Eusebius calls Abraham's father Athar (an easy transition from Thara, Geiger says), which became the Arabic Azar. See Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 100–101. William Brinner maintains that the name Azar derives from a confusion with the biblical Eliezer, Abraham's loyal Damascene servant; Arab scholars mistakenly understood the name's 'El' as the definite article “al” (ال) and omitted it. This resulted in “Azar.” See his “Some Problems in the Arabic Transmission of Biblical Names” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots*, ed. Z. Zevit, S. Gitin, and M. Sokoloff (Indiana: Eisenbraun's, 1995), 19–27. Josef Horovitz adds that the Hebrew “Eliezer” was first interchanged with “Elazar,” thus explaining why the Arabic is Azar and not “Ee-azar.” He also posits that the name is most likely a typographical error for “Uzayr (عَزَّار), Ezra.” See his “Jewish Proper Names,” 157. Haim Schwarbaum explains Horovitz's claim of the move from ‘Uzayr to Azar by noting that folk etymology does not discriminate between the sounds “Uzer” and “Azar.”

instead toward the Hebrew Bible as jumping-off point. This would suggest that the prophecy narrative likely originated as earlier Jewish exegesis of and homiletics on the lacuna-filled biblical text.

B. *The Pre-Islamic Sources and the Birth of Abraham*

Yet, precisely where we would expect to find voluminous material, or at the very least a reference to the matter at hand, we find the pre-Islamic biblical narrative expansions shrouded in almost complete silence. Unlike the Islamic texts for which Sidersky insists they served as a source regarding the sibyllic motif,⁴⁰ the pre-Islamic post-biblical Jewish sources make no mention whatsoever of a prophecy concerning Abraham's birth. Indeed, the fact of Abraham's birth and the circumstances surrounding it scarcely interest the early midrash at all. The majority of texts do not attribute even a childhood to the patriarch, to say nothing of any pre-natal existence. For the most part, the pre-Islamic midrash encounters Abraham for the first time as an adult, just as the Bible does. As far as the early narratives are concerned, Abraham "came to the world in the usual way," unaccompanied by prophecies, predictions, stars, miracles, or any divine communiqué whatsoever.

Analysis of a passage in *Midrash Tanhuma*, a homiletic pre-Qur'ānic Palestinian midrash on the Five Books of Moses, provides an explanation of sorts for such early rabbinic indifference.⁴¹ Careful analy-

See his *Biblical and Extra-Biblical Legends*, 93. Neither Brinner nor Horovitz explains why the Muslims would have confused Terah and Eliezer in the first place since the two men do not appear together in any Biblical or midrashic scenario I could locate. Ahmad Shah, in his *The Biblical Characters and Other Sages of the Qur'an* (Cawnpore: Christ Church Mission Press, 1905) asserts that the word Azar is Persian, meaning fire, and is the ancient name of the fiery planet Mars. The Chaldeans acknowledged this planet as a deity and hence the name became common among the Chaldean nobility (p. 23). Traditional Muslim scholarship explains the word as a derivative of a root meaning crooked, for Ibrāhīm's pagan father perverted the truth. See al-Suyūti, 6:74 and al-Tabarī, *Tafsīr*, 11:243, among others. For more on this topic, see Calder "Tafsīr from Tabarī to Ibn Kathīr," 102.

⁴⁰ Sidersky, 33–34.

⁴¹ Some discrepancy exists regarding the exact dating of *Midrash Tanhuma*. According to *EJ* (s.v. "Literature, Jewish," [11:321]), the original dates to 6th century CE Palestine. Although Zunz dates it to the first half of the 9th century CE, F. Böhl's analysis, considered more exact, places it at the beginning of the 5th century CE. See Strack and Stemberger, 305.

sis reveals that the midrashic rabbis mention nothing because they understood from Scripture itself that nothing worthy of mention occurred. In his exposition of Song of Songs 8:8, R. Berekhiah teaches that when Abraham was thrown into Nimrod's fiery furnace, the Ministering Angels came to God to plead with Him to save His loyal follower from death. Until that point, declares R. Berekhiah, God had not performed any miracles whatsoever for Abraham.⁴² In other words, God remained uninvolved in Abraham's life in any extraordinary fashion right up until the moment of salvation from the furnace. God had not shown Himself to Abraham before then, nor had He conversed with him or otherwise involved Himself in His servant's life. Most assuredly, God did not alert anyone—via prophet, astrology, or dream—of Abraham's impending birth or behavior. Until saved from certain death by fire, Abraham had lived a “normal” life, one in which there had been no obvious contact with or special treatment from the divine realm.

Given the silence of the pre-Islamic Jewish sources, the assertion by Sidersky and others that Judaism influenced Islam regarding this early episode in the forefather's biography appears unsupportable. The midrashic texts which make no reference at all to Abraham's birth or to the period preceding his conception could not likely have served as the sources for the fairly well-developed sibyllic Islamic narratives. Indeed, if the influence of these early Jewish texts can be seen anywhere in the Islamic literature on Ibrāhīm's birth, it is in the silence of Mujāhid and Ibn Qutayba. As mentioned earlier, these authors stand alone in that neither includes a prophetic prediction or birth account for Ibrāhīm despite their otherwise extensive treatment of his biography. Furthermore, both authors display an intimate connection and familiarity with the Jewish materials.

C. *Post-Qur'ānic Jewish Sources*

In contrast to the early midrashic silence on the topic of Abraham's birth, the post-Qur'ānic Jewish texts—those which date to after the birth and spread of Islam—do address the issue. For these texts and their authors, the silence of the Bible and the earlier Jewish narrative

⁴² *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. Shelomo Buber (New York: Hotsa'at Sefer, 1946), 1:58.

expansions left a gap in Abraham's biography that required filling-in. In doing so, the post-Qur'anic Jewish literature deviated from the older Jewish tradition not bothered by the Scriptural quiet. Like the Islamic narratives that predate them and which they resemble, the post-Qur'anic Jewish sources tell of a prediction of the birth of a boy who will destroy the kingdom. The alarmed monarch tries to prevent the fulfillment of the oracle but his attempts prove futile. Ultimately, the hunted child is squirreled away to safety, hidden from the murderous eye of the regent.

The parallels between the Islamic and Jewish versions manifest themselves most obviously in the very detailed 11th–12th century *Sefer ha-Yashar*.⁴³ In those days, the *Yashar* narrative begins, Terah was Nimrod's chief military officer and was very much in the king's favor. On the night that Abraham was born to him, all of Terah's servants and Nimrod's astrologers and sages gathered at Terah's house for a celebratory feast. Upon departing, the astrologers looked up into the sky and noticed a terrifying sign. As they watched in shock, a star streaked across the sky from the east and swallowed four stars from four different directions. The astrologers understood immediately: the child who had been born to Terah would grow to father a nation that would overthrow kingdoms and inherit their lands. The following morning, they informed the king of the news and provided a solution. Buy the child from Terah, they urged, and kill him before he grows old enough to cause harm. Nimrod considered his options and found his astrologers' plan pleasing. He summoned Terah and offered to fill his house with gold and silver in return for the newborn son. All that the king desires will his servant do, Terah responded, but let me first get your opinion about what happened to me yesterday. A man came to me, he began, and demanded I sell him the wondrous horse that the king himself had given me. I told him, Terah continued, that I could do no such thing until I checked with the king himself. Nimrod became incensed and thundered: how could one sell such a fine animal for any amount of money?! What good is the money when you have given away such a unique horse?! Terah replied: I feel the same way about my son; what good is all that

⁴³ *Sefer ha-Yashar*, (Berlin: Binyamin Hertz, 1923), 23–27. On the date of *Sefer ha-Yashar*, see Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism (Haggadic Studies)* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1961).

money if I sell you my son and you kill him; when I die without an heir, the money will revert to the king. Teraḥ then requested a three-day period in which to consider the king's proposal. He returned home, grabbed Abraham and a wet-nurse and hid them in a cave. At the end of the three day respite, Teraḥ brought to Nimrod a child born to one of his servants on the same day as Abraham. Nimrod did not detect the ruse and was pacified.

As in the Islamic accounts which depict Azar as a close confidant to the king and high-level court player—advisor, astrologer, or treasurer of the idol-house⁴⁴—*Yashar*'s Teraḥ commands a high position in Nimrod's government, chief military officer.⁴⁵ Information about Abraham is gleaned by astrologers reading abnormal movements in the skies, just as in a number of the Islamic texts. Even the form of the heavenly sign recalls the Islamic accounts; while the Islamic narratives tell of a star so bright it blotted out the light of the sun and the moon, here a star flashes across the sky consuming the light of four other stars.⁴⁶ Additionally, Nimrod, like his Islamic counterpart, plans to subvert the prediction by murdering the child in accordance with the advice of his astrologers.

Two slightly later post-Qur'ānic midrashic works, the 12th century Italian/Spanish *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*⁴⁷ and the 13th century Yemenite *Midrash ha-Gadol*⁴⁸ relay an only slightly divergent version.

⁴⁴ For royal advisor/*wazīr*, see Ibn 'Asākir, 167; Ishāq ibn Bishr, 160b; al-Kisā'ī 126–128; al-Majlisī 12:31; al-Ya'qūbī, 19; for astrologer, see al-Majlisī, 12:29–30, 41–42; al-Qummi, 1:206–207; for treasurer of the idol-house, see al-Tabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 1:211 (1/224–225) and al-Tha'labī, 86. Elsewhere, al-Tabarī refers to him as just an idol-maker (*Ta'rikh*, 1:235 and 237 [1/256 and 258]).

⁴⁵ Teraḥ's position as chief military officer recalls one of the most famous Court Jews, Samuel Ha-Nagid, aka Ismā'īl ibn Naghrela, who lived just before *Yashar*'s date of composition. Samuel (993–1055 CE) served as vizier under the Granadan king Habbūs and as vizier and chief military commander under his son Bādis. For more, see *EJ*, s.v. "Samuel Ha-Nagid," by A. M. Habermann (14:816).

⁴⁶ Al-Majlisī, 12:18–19; al-Suyūtī on 6:25; al-Tabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 1:236 (1/257). The particular phrasing in which one star 'swallows' stars from the four corners of the earth appears to be a specifically 11th century Jewish description. See also the 11th century *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, 34:1ff (see n. 51); and, the medieval *Ma'aseh Avraham* in *Bet ha-Midrash*, ed. Adolph Jellinek (Jerusalem: Bamberger and Wahrmann, 1938), 2:118 (see below).

⁴⁷ *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel or the Hebrew Bible Historiale*, trans. Moses Gaster (New York: Ktav, 1971), chapter 34.

⁴⁸ *Midrash ha-Gadol (Bereishit)*, ed. Mordecai Margulies (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1947, 1956), Gen. 11:28. Though the work itself is anonymous, scholars are now fairly certain that the author/compiler is the 13th century Yemenite David

According to these two works, at the time of Abraham's birth, Nimrod's astrologers and magicians informed him of a troublesome fact. A boy had been born who was going to overthrow kingdoms, specifically and especially Nimrod's, and would inherit the world. They advised the king to send gold-laden messengers to the father's house and buy the child from him. Teraḥ, himself a royal attendant, was sitting amongst them and scoffed at their plan. He argued: that is tantamount to saying to a mule, 'you can have all this food if I can cut off your head in return'; what good is the food if one lacks the head with which to eat it? So too, Teraḥ maintained, what good are riches if one has no one to inherit them? Immediately the astrologers realized that Teraḥ's wife must have given birth to a boy-child earlier in the day and questioned him about it. Teraḥ lied, admitting that a boy had been born to him that day but insisting that he had died in childbirth. No, no, insisted the astrologers, we are not speaking of one who died; we can see a live son in the heavens, so go and get him. Intent on saving his son from Nimrod's murderous designs, Teraḥ rushed home, grabbed the day-old Abraham and his wet-nurse and hid them in a cave for three years.

The differences between the *Yashar* version and that of *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* and *Midrash ha-Gadol* are negotiable and attributable to the diverging versions in the Islamic tradition. Where *Yashar*'s astrologers comprehend immediately that Teraḥ is the father of the wanted child, in the two later Jewish texts they understand his relationship to the child only after his parable-objection to their plan. While numerous Islamic accounts record that the astrologers/advisors remain wholly ignorant of Ibrāhīm's genealogy, al-Kisā'ī and al-Ṭabarī both include renditions in which the astrologers are aware of Azar's role from the very beginning.⁴⁹ Aside from these minor variations, the slightly later midrashic narratives exhibit the same similarities to the Islamic accounts that are visible in *Sefer ha-Yashar*.

Post-Qur'ānic midrashic works continue to follow the Islamic narratives, rather than the early midrashic accounts. In his collection of medieval midrashic narratives known as *Bet ha-Midrash*, Jellinek

ben Amram Adani. For a more extensive discussion on the dating of this text, see above, p. 40.

⁴⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 7:248; idem, *Ta'rikh*, 1:234 (1/254); al-Kisā'ī, 125–126, as discussed above.

recounts a Judeo-Arabic “Story of Abraham” (*Ma‘aseh Avraham*) that synthesizes different elements from the *Jerahmeel/Midrash ha-Gadol* versions and the *Yashar* rendition.⁵⁰ According to *Ma‘aseh Avraham*, one night Nimrod and his advisors were looking into the heavens when they suddenly witnessed one exceptionally bright and strong star devour four lesser stars. Alarmed, Nimrod demanded an explanation from his advisors. A boy was born tonight, they interpreted, who will overthrow you and your religion. Nimrod issued a decree to find and kill the child. Teraḥ, who as one of Nimrod’s viziers was present for this whole affair, objected and noted that if other nations were to hear that the king was afraid of a little baby, they would understand Nimrod to be weak and ineffectual. Nimrod’s advisors then suggested the king buy the child from his parents. Teraḥ objected again, comparing Nimrod’s offer to buy (and kill) the child from his father in return for a house full of gold to an offer to cut off a horse’s head in return for a bag of oats. As in *Jerahmeel/Midrash ha-Gadol*, Teraḥ’s parable revealed him to be the father of the child for whom Nimrod was searching. From your answer, reasoned the astrologers, we understand that the child born to you this evening is the very child whose sign we have just read in the heavens. In an attempt to save his son’s life, Teraḥ lied and insisted that the child had already died. No, persisted the advisors, the sign points to one who is alive, so go get him. Teraḥ ran home, grabbed his son and a wet-nurse, and hid them in a cave, where they remained for 13 years.

⁵⁰ *Bet ha-Midrash*, 2:xxxii–xxxiv. In his introduction, Jellinek informs his readers that this short two page rendering, brought from Cairo by Prof. Tischendorf, corresponds to the Hebrew version he includes on 2:118–119. The Hebrew, he maintains, derives from a work by the 13th century Saragossan Bahya ben Asher. This was in itself probably taken from the 11th century R. Moshe ha-Darshan’s *Bereishit Rabbati*, a midrashic anthology based entirely on the fifth century CE midrashic *Genesis Rabbah* and supplemented with R. Moshe’s “own knowledge and remarkable creativity” (*EJ*, 12:429). The disparity between the *Bereishit Rabbati* and *Genesis Rabbah* versions displays the existence of more “remarkable creativity” than actual shared material; despite repeated attempts, I could not locate this episode in *Bereishit Rabbati*. Furthermore, though Jellinek claims the Judeo-Arabic and the Hebrew correspond to one another, the two do not match up on a number of points and do not, in fact, appear to me to be the same text. For *Bereishit Rabbati* see Moshe ha-Darshan, *Midrash Bereishit Rabbati*, ed. Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem, 1940).

D. Who Influenced Whom?

Whereas Sidersky and others asserted that the post-Qur'ānic Islamic accounts of the annunciation of Abraham and his birth resulted from the influence of Judaism on Islam, a closer analysis of the texts has revealed the opposite to be true. Islam, and not Judaism, played the active role in the motif's cross-tradition adventure. The pre-Islamic midrashic narratives concerning Abraham make no mention of or reference to any such birth announcement. As far as we can tell, for the pre-Islamic midrashists, Abraham's birth resembled all other births the world over; his mother conceived from her husband and bore a child who grew to adolescence in the safety of his family. This uneventful understanding of the events remains the case in both the canonical and the pseudepigraphal/apocryphal post-Biblical literature. The sibyllic theme and its components first appear on the scene in the *Islamic* configuration of Ibrāhīm's life. It is here that we find the prophecy/dream/astrological reading that warns the king of his impending fall at the hands of an as yet unborn child. Here we learn, for the first time, of Namrūd/Nimrod's vicious yet futile attempts to derail the prediction and annihilate his competition. Similarly, it is here, in the Islamic texts, that we first read of Ibrāhīm's rescue from Namrūd/Nimrod's murderous intentions and of his parents' attempts to save him.

Though Sidersky is correct in noting that this same motif does in fact appear in the Jewish sources, his mistake derives from his failure to appreciate the nature of those sources. As described in detail above, the annunciation of the patriarch occurs only in those Jewish texts composed or closed in the years following the rise and proliferation of Islam. Moreover, this motif appears only in those Jewish texts composed in geographic areas under both Islamic political control and Islamic religious and cultural influence; both *Sefer ha-Yashar* and the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* hail from 11th–12th century CE Islamic Andalusia. *Midrash ha-Gadol*, though it contains much information that predates Islam, remained open to the possibility of outside influence for centuries until it was finally closed in the 13th century CE in Muslim Yemen. The much later *Ma'aseh Avraham* merely repeats what these earlier texts had already taught.⁵¹ Based on this infor-

⁵¹ On the nature and dating of *Bet ha-Midrash*, see below.

mation, one may conclude that the Abrahamic annunciation motif was carried from the Islamic community into the Jewish communities and their texts and did not result from Jewish influence on Islam.

III. Significance of Pre- v. Post-Natal Prophecy: Timing is Everything

Though the Islamic and Jewish versions of Abraham's birth appear to be reflections of one another, closer analysis reveals that the traditions differ in one vital area—the timing of the prophecy. The Islamic texts tell unfailingly of prophecy preceding conception, in some cases almost causing it (for example, Azar is sent back to the all-female town). The midrashic narratives, on the other hand, consistently maintain the opposite. According to the post-Qur'anic Jewish narrative expansions, Abraham's mother gives birth to him first. Only afterward, when the child is already a living, breathing reality, do Nimrod and his astrologers receive word of the nemesis' arrival. Though the later Jewish authors accepted the idea of a prophetic prediction of Abraham, they rejected the time-line drawn by their Muslim counterparts. Rather than dismiss the story as a whole, they simply replaced what was objectionable with something acceptable. By altering a few seemingly insignificant words, a pre-natal prediction became a post-natal report.

But, what was it about the time-line that so offended Jewish sensibilities? Before conception, after delivery . . . what really is the difference? Either way, word of Abraham qua Abraham—iconoclast, rebel, upstart—reaches the king and his court well before the child himself realizes his potential and his role in the world. Moreover, as we have seen, regardless of when the prophecy occurs, the same results ensue: Nimrod and Namrûd both panic and try to have the boy eliminated but the baby is whisked away to safety where he remains until the danger passes. In fact, can we not dismiss the scheduling variant as attributable merely to differences in story-telling technique?

The very consistency with which the disparity occurs indicates the presence of something other than stylistic differences at work and precludes dismissing it as cultural or story-telling deviations. In other words, if the variation in the timing of the prediction resulted from divergent narrative techniques, one would expect at least some crossover between the two traditions. After all, the later Jewish authors

who included the prophecy motif were living amongst Muslims, in the Muslim Empire, and, like the people amongst whom they lived, spoke Arabic as their mother tongue. They read and wrote the same style of poetry and folk-literature, both secular and religious.⁵² One would expect to find, then, at least one Jewish text with a pre-natal oracle or, alternatively, one reliable Islamic text in which the prophecy follows conception. And yet, Islamic texts cling to the notion of prophecy first and the Jewish texts to conception first. Why does either tradition place such emphasis on differentiating such a seemingly insignificant detail? The answer must be that the detail is *not* insignificant, nor does its place in the chronology of the narrative result merely from subjective style and whim.

Indeed, the timing of the prophecy constitutes a significant indicator of the understanding each tradition has of the character of Abraham as the religion's forefather. As other elements in the Ibrāhīm narrative likewise demonstrate, Islam conceives of Ibrāhīm as a man *chosen by Allah* to do His work on earth, to turn his people away from idolatry and back to the true faith (Islam). Ibrāhīm does not initiate his relationship with Allah. Instead, Allah creates Ibrāhīm expressly for this purpose; Ibrāhīm is not the product of human family planning or parental passions alone. Rather, the early, pre-conception placement of the prophecy indicates that before his gametes have been introduced, before he is even a twinkle in his parents' eyes, the fact of Ibrāhīm's existence and his role in the world have been determined by Allah *and* already discovered by the human prognosticators. This fits with the established Muslim view that holds that prophets are chosen by Allah; they do not achieve the status of prophecy through their own efforts but are divinely pre-programmed.⁵³

On the off chance that readers would not pick up on this intimation, that Ibrāhīm's entire existence, as well as the king's early discovery, is preordained by Allah, the classical historian and exegete al-Tabarī states the point outright. In an *isnād* from Muḥammad ibn Ḥamīd—Salama ibn al-Faḍl—Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, al-Tabarī relates that the stargazers approached Namrūd, “when Allah desired to send Ibrāhīm as a proof to His/his people, and as a messenger to His

⁵² See, for example, Scheindlin, *Wine, Women and Death*, Introduction; idem, *The Gazelle*, Introduction.

⁵³ Calder, “*Tafsīr from Tabarī to Ibn Kathīr . . .*,” 117.

servants, for there had been no messengers between Nūh and Ibrāhīm except for Hūd and Shālih, and when the time of Ibrāhīm, of whom Allah wanted what He wanted, drew near.”⁵⁴ According to al-Tabarī and his source Ibn Ishāq, Allah, not Ibrāhīm’s parents, determined both that they would have a child and when the child would be born. Allah also dictated that that child would end idolatry and reinstate monotheism. Moreover, Allah purposely sent word of Ibrāhīm ahead to his enemies.

Ishāq ibn Bishr and Ibn ‘Asākir echo this sentiment and support the idea of divine control and predeterminism as active in the lottery. As noted earlier, both relate that Namrūd received word of the child’s impending birth but did not know to whom the child would be born. Therefore, the king ordered his wazīrs to submit to a divination test. Azar was then amongst them and the lot should have fallen to him, thus identifying him as the child’s father. Instead, the lot of the local goddess fell to Azar and he became her protector and the arbiter of proper idol-worship. This, relate the exegetes, was the result of Allah’s kindness for his friend (خليل, *khalīl*) Ibrāhīm.⁵⁵ Unlike the earlier Jewish *Midrash Tanhuma*, wherein God involves Himself in Abraham’s life for the first time only much later in the fire of Chaldea, Ishāq ibn Bishr and Ibn ‘Asākir note His involvement from the very beginning. Allah intervened even before Ibrāhīm had been conceived, by announcing, protecting and directing the events in his life well in advance.

Whereas the Islamic configuration of the prediction motif suggests the patriarch as a predestined personality, the Jewish narrative expansions utilize the timing of the prophecy to hint at an opposite understanding of the forefather; the Jewish texts present the forefather as an individual with control over his destiny and with free will. Namrūd and his astrologers learn all there is to know about the child Ibrāhīm well before his conception because all has already been decided from above and is therefore knowable. Nimrod and his cronies, however, do not get involved until after the child has already been born. Indeed, they *can not* get involved earlier for they are not made aware of Abraham until *after* his physical arrival in the world. God, aside from His traditional role as ‘Creator of All,’ has no role in Abraham’s

⁵⁴ *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 7:248–9 (on Q 6:76) and *Ta’rīkh*, 1:234 (1/254).

⁵⁵ Ishāq ibn Bishr, 161a; Ibn ‘Asākir, 6:167.

creation or arrival. The child is conceived and then born in the same fashion as ordinary children. For the Jewish narratives, Abraham's existence was a product of his parents' desires, not God's plans. The prophecy's appearance only *after* Abraham's birth and the reformulated message concerning his future behavior seem more indicators of the child's uniqueness, recognitions of his character, than regulations of it. Once the child has come to life, the stars or the dream only *signify* that he will grow to do great things. They do not ordain it.

This concept of a divine recognition of Abraham's unique character that does not necessarily carry with it divine determination of Abraham's character can be seen in a pre-Islamic exegetical midrashic commentary on Joshua 14:15.⁵⁶ The third century Palestinian *amora*⁵⁷ Rabbi Levi states,

אַדָּם הַרְאִשׁוֹן, *adam ha-rishon*). However, the Holy One Blessed Be He said: Lest he be corrupted and there will arise no one to repair (the damage) after him. Rather, I will create Adam first so that if he is corrupted, Abraham will come and repair (the damage) after him.

According to Rabbi Levi, God clearly recognizes Abraham's meritorious character and his role as the re-founder of monotheism. Additionally, God knows that if Adam sins and is corrupted, He can count on Abraham to redirect the world. And indeed, this is precisely what occurs; the world abandons God in favor of sin and idols until Abraham arrives and champions the one true God. In the face of this foreknowledge, however, here God simultaneously acknowledges Abraham's free-will and control over his own behavior and over the course his life will take: "Lest he be corrupted," God says of Abraham. With this short expression, R. Levi's God acknowledges that Abraham *could* be corrupted from His path, should he desire to be.⁵⁸ Were Abraham's actions predetermined or divinely regulated, God would have had no such concern.

⁵⁶ *Midrash Rabbah Bereishit* [Genesis Rabbah], eds. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965), 14:6.

⁵⁷ The rabbinic era of Jewish history is conventionally divided up into four periods, or generations, of rabbis regarded as authoritative. An *amora* (pl. *amora'im*) is a member of the second generation, which ranges from the early third century CE up to c. 500 CE. See Strack and Stemberger, 7.

⁵⁸ Jewish tradition recognizes no infallibility of its prophets and ancestors, but acknowledges their having sinned, a matter that led to considerable Islamic anti-

The delayed prediction, and its implication of free-will and charisma, accounts for other noticeable differences between the Jewish and Islamic narratives. A number of motifs present in the Islamic accounts of Ibrāhīm’s birth do not appear in the later Jewish renderings of Abraham’s. Once the midrashic Nimrod is aware that the child who will overthrow him has already been born, he can no longer order the preventive separation of men from women Namrūd does. And indeed this motif does not appear in the later Jewish texts. Similarly, since Nimrod learns of the birth only after it occurs, logically he can not then be suspicious of pregnant women nor order the midwives to kill all the newborn boys as their mothers deliver them. By the time Nimrod would have received word, the midwife in charge of Abraham’s delivery would have been long gone. And so, the narrative omits this motif as well. The absence of these two elements from the midrashic accounts results in the absence of two additionally now unnecessary motifs: Abraham’s mother’s hiding her pregnancy and her hiding the child’s birth from everyone, including her husband. If no one is looking for the fetus or the newly born child, and in the midrashic accounts no one is, there is no need for Abraham’s mother to hide herself or him. Instead, Abraham’s mother gives birth to him with a clear conscience and with the full knowledge and complicity of her husband. The midrashic Terah is so involved, it is he, and not his wife, who attempts to save his son from Nimrod’s subsequent evil intentions by lying and then hiding him away.

IV. *Midrashic Exception*

A. *Ma’aseh Avraham Avinu*

Of all the post-Qur’ānic Jewish texts surveyed, one diverges from this pattern and accepts the idea of a pre-natal prophecy, Terah’s

Jewish polemic in the medieval period. See Camilla Adang, “Judaism and the Bible in al-Maqdisi’s “*Kitāb al-bad’ā wa-l-ta’rīkh*,” in *Soferim Muslemim ‘al Yehudim ve-Yahadut* [Muslim Writers on Jews and Judaism], ed. Hava Lazarus Yafeh (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for the History of Israel, 1996), especially 59–68; Moshe Perlmann, “Muslim Polemics against Judaism in the Middle Ages,” in *Soferim Muslemim*, 119–154; Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 29–34; and, Marc Bernstein, *The Story of Our Master Joseph*, 144–145.

ignorance, and God's interference in the course of events. Dubbed *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu*⁵⁹ (*MAA*), this medieval Hebrew text first appeared in print in Constantinople in 1580 CE. Alone among its Jewish cohorts, *MAA* supports the Islamic time-line of prophecy preceding parturition. As a consequence, *MAA* alone contains the motifs of the segregation of the women, the specially appointed midwives, the command to kill the newborn boys at birth, and Abraham's mother's ploy to hide her son from his father. Moreover, only *MAA* interjects God into the story as a manipulator of the events and as Abraham's pre-natal protector.

According to the unnamed author to whom the text often refers (“אמֵר דמִינֵיד”, *amar ha-maggid*, “the author said”), Nimrod, who was very wise, saw in the stars that a person was to be born who would stand before him, challenge him, and win, thereby wresting his kingdom from him. Unsure of what to do with such information, the king sent for his officers in order to seek advice regarding this as-yet-unborn adversary. They suggested that he collect all the pregnant women of the realm into a specially built large house, place a watchman over them, and charge the midwives to kill any boys then born.⁶⁰ The mother of a girl, conversely, would be rewarded.⁶¹ Lest we think that Abraham had already been born or conceived, the narrator interrupts with an aside. It was *at this time* (implying, ‘and not before’), he interjects, that the mother of Abraham went and took Terah for herself as a husband. Three months later, her belly began to grow and her face began to change colors.⁶² Not surpris-

⁵⁹ Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash*, 1:25–34. *MAA* should not to be confused with the aforementioned *Ma'aseh Avraham*.

⁶⁰ Strangely, the advisors suggest he bring in all the pregnant animals as well (p. 25).

⁶¹ Jellinek, 1:25, “And if it is a daughter, she shall live, and give gifts to her mother and dress her in royal garments and call before her, ‘This is what shall be done to a woman who bears a daughter!’” י’אָם בַּת הָאָזֶן וְהַנְּזֵן מְתֻנָּה לְאַמָּה. (וְגַבְבִּשָּׂנוּ בְּנֵי מִלְכֹות וְתָקְרָא לִפְנֵיהֶ כִּכְהֵ עִשָּׂה לְאַשְׁר תַּלְדֵּ בָּהּ.) The language and style of this segment in particular and of the entire narrative in general bears a striking resemblance to the biblical book of Esther. Esther 6:7–8 describes Haman's advice to the king on how to honor one whom the king desires to honor: such a one should be dressed in royal clothing, with a crown, and paraded through the streets on a royal horse. Verse 9 then reads “And it shall be called before him: This is what shall be done to a man whom the king desires to honor!”

⁶² To green. Ibrāhīm's pregnant mother's face turns green in the Islamic narrative as well. I am unsure why the medieval authors viewed greenishness as a sign of pregnancy unless they meant to indicate morning sickness. Interestingly, green is traditionally held to have been Muhammad's color.

ingly, Terah became worried and asked his wife what was wrong. Every year I get sick with the same stomach illness and it is nothing, she assured him. Terah, however, did not believe her and, suspecting she was pregnant, demanded to see her stomach. At the exact moment during which Terah laid his hand upon his wife, God caused a miracle to occur and the fetus moved up to her chest so that Terah felt nothing.⁶³ Appeased, he dropped the matter. When her time to give birth arrived, she feared the child would be discovered and delivered up to Nimrod's forces, so she left town and gave birth secretly in a cave near the river.

B. *MAA: Jewish or Muslim Text?*

It is at this point that a word needs to be said about the nature of *MAA* and the volumes of *Bet Ha-Midrash* in general, in which the printed version is found.⁶⁴ Published in the mid-19th century by the German-Jewish scholar Adolph Jellinek, *Bet Ha-Midrash* is a six-volume work made up of numerous “short stories” culled from medieval sources by Jellinek himself. Many of these texts had not been published before Jellinek. Authors, their dates, and, more importantly for the matter at hand, their sources are not always known nor

⁶³ Jewish folklore tells of similar miracles occurring to the pregnant mothers of other Jewish heroes. One of the more famous concerns the mother of the great Bible commentator R. Solomon Yitzḥaki (Rashi, 1040–1105 CE), who lived in roughly the same period in which *Yashar* was composed. According to legend, Rashi's mother was once walking down an exceedingly narrow alleyway in the city of Worms when two carriages (one of which, in other versions, is sometimes said to have been driven by anti-Semitic bishop) came barreling down the alleyway. Since Rashi's mother was very pregnant with him at the time, and hence very large, and the alley very narrow, she (and he) were in danger of being crushed. She squeezed back toward the wall and, miraculously, a niche formed, just big enough for her and her belly. See Menahem Glenn, “On Rashi's Life and Teachings” in Simon Federbush, ed., *Rashi: His Teachings and Personality Essays on the Occasion of the 850th Anniversary of His Death* [Hebrew] (NY: The Cultural Department of the World Jewish Congress and the Torah Culture Department of the Jewish Agency, 1958), 133. For a photo of the niche, see Rafael Halperin, *Rashi: Hayyav u-Ferushav*, ([Bene Berak]: Hekdesh Ru'ah Ya'akov, 1997), v. 1, p. 64.

⁶⁴ The discovery of the Cairo Geniza yielded manuscript versions, now in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library in Leningrad, identified by later historians as the same text as *MAA*. Some of these include episodes, not relevant to the current motif, that are absent from Jellinek's version. See Ben-Shammai, “Sippurei Avraham,” 113–114, and Joshua Finkel, “An Arabic Story of Abraham,” *HUCA* 12–13 (1937–38): 397–398.

included. Because of this, the precise nature of many of the essays remains obscure. One can not tell whether the original version of a given narrative was midrashic, in the technical canonical sense of the term, folkloric, or pseudepigraphal.

MAA, specifically, carries its own additional unique set of problems. According to scholarly consensus, *MAA* is the Hebrew translation of a much earlier Judeo-Arabic work which was itself a translated transcription of an 11th–12th century Arabic Islamic text.⁶⁵ The not-so-veiled implication of this is that *MAA* is not in fact a Jewish composition at all. In his article on this topic, Finkel points to a number of words and phrases that betray the Islamic source. For example, in the Islamic texts Nimrod is often known as *al-kāfir* (الكافر); *MAA* refers to Nimrod as a “*kofer*” (כופר, heretic, infidel) rather than the more commonly used rabbinic epithet for the man, “*rasha*” (רשע, evildoer). Similarly, he notes, *MAA* provides the exact Hebrew translation, “הָהִיא קָרְהָה וְשָׁלֹוָה עַל עֲבָדֵי אֱבָרָהָם,” “[Fire,] be cool and safe for Ibrāhīm” (Q 21:69). And, in addition to numerous Arabisms which likely resulted from the historical Arabization of Jewish culture in Arab lands rather than from the borrowing of texts, Finkel notes that the three Qur’ānic quotes that appear in the Hebrew translation of *MAA* are the very quotes cited in different Muslim versions.⁶⁶ He logically concludes that such accuracy in verses must be due to a direct reliance upon a Muslim account and not to hearsay from the surrounding Islamic milieu.

If, as scholars maintain, the original text of *MAA* was Islamic and if this Islamic original contained motifs not found elsewhere in Jewish literature (such the timing of the prophecy of Abraham’s birth), why would a translator see fit to translate the text for the Jews, into a Jewish language? Why bother? The answer lies in the traditionally accepted religious affiliation of the assumed original author. Traditional

⁶⁵ Finkel, 387–409; Jellinek himself (1:xvi) claims the original was an Arabic text; Max Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge zur Semitischen Sagenkunde* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1893), 130, posits that the original was not only Arabic but was specifically Muslim. The dating of the Arabic version follows Bernard Chapira and Haggai Ben-Shammai. See Ben-Shammai, “Sippurei Avraham be-‘Aravit-Yehudit mi-Meqor Muslemi; Qeta‘im Hadashim” [Judeo-Arabic Stories of Abraham from an Islamic Source—New Chapters], *Higrei Ever ve-Arv* 1993:111–133.

⁶⁶ The other two Qur’ānic verses are 7:158 and 2:256. Ben-Shammai notes additional quotes and parallels in his treatment of the issue.

Islamic scholarship attributes much of the information in the *isrā’iliyyāt* texts to the very early Yemenite Jewish convert to Islam, Ka'b al-Ahbār (d. 652 CE). Ka'b's knowledge of Judaism was so extensive that he is said to have memorized the entire Torah by heart as well as *kutub al-dars*, presumably books of midrash.⁶⁷ Indeed, al-Kisā’ī names Ka'b outright as the source of the Ibrāhīm birth narrative (pp. 125ff). Like the larger Islamic society in which he lived, says Chapira, the 12th century Spanish-Jewish scribe who first transcribed the text from *Judeo-Arabic* into *Hebrew* identified Ka'b as the anonymous מגיד (maggid) or قائل (qā'il). Recognizing Ka'b as the well-known Jewish scholar of Muḥammad's time, as the Muslims maintained, the translator thus did not doubt the text's Jewish origin. It seems, Chapira continues, that the Jews of the 12th century CE considered the conversion to Islam of so learned a Jew as Ka'b to have been a forced conversion, and considered him Jewish both at heart and in his writings.⁶⁸ Therefore, when the *Judeo-Arabic* version of *MAA* crossed his desk, our 12th century translator found no reason not to translate what he understood to be a 'Jewish' story into Hebrew.⁶⁹ Finkel shines a more political light on the mind set of the translator. Along with Chapira, Finkel maintains that the translator accepted the Muslim attribution of the narrative to the originally Jewish Ka'b. Finkel posits that he translated the text for more proactive reasons, however: perhaps the translator envisioned that a Jewish contribution to Islam would serve to raise the prestige of the Jews in the eyes of the Muslims, and so he made the text available to the Jewish community for their political use.

⁶⁷ Halperin and Newby, "Two Castrated Bulls," 631–638; Gordon Newby, "Tafsīr *Isrā’iliyyāt*," 687; Perlmann, "A Legendary Story of Ka'b al-Ahbār's Conversion to Islam," 85–99; idem, "Another Ka'b al-Ahbār Story," 48–58.

⁶⁸ This theory is not without historical precedent. Officially Islam does not recognize forced conversions, insisting that in order to become Muslim, one must honestly believe in Allah and accept Muḥammad as His messenger. Nonetheless, from time to time some Islamic empires forced their non-Muslim subjects to convert on pain of death. In *Iggeret ha-Nehama* (*Letter of Consolation*) and *Iggeret ha-Shemad* (*Letter on Apostasy*), Maimon ben Joseph and his son the famed Maimonides, respectively, wrote to Jewish communities forced to convert to Islam on pain of death by Almohad sword (mid-12th century CE). They offered advice and a measure of consolation for these forced converts. For translations of these letters, see Franz Kobler, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Letters* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1953), v. 1, pgs. 166–191.

⁶⁹ Chapira, "Légendes bibliques," 89–94. In the additional fragments published by Ben-Shammai in "Sippurei Avraham," Ka'b is named explicitly.

Accordingly, and believing in the Jewish Ka'b as the original author, the Judeo-Arabic translator left all Qur'anic references and Arabisms intact when translating.⁷⁰

That said, one can hardly view *MAA* in the same light in which one views the more reliably Jewish sources, even those that date to the post-Qur'anic medieval period. Whereas the other post-Qur'anic Jewish narrative expansions fall under the rubric of midrash—exegetically and/or homiletically oriented literature—the precise nature of *MAA* remains shrouded in a measure of mystery and doubt. Indeed, it is very likely that *MAA* is simply an Islamic text translated into a Jewish language by a politically-oriented or not-too-scholarly translator. As such, when *MAA* diverges wildly from the majority of Jewish texts, as it does here, one can not consider this proof of an alternate authoritative Jewish perspective. Quite possibly, the text went unnoticed by the majority of Jewish scholars and thus retained its non-Jewish values. More likely than not, it would have remained obscure if not for Jellinek and his modern preservationist tendencies.⁷¹

V. The Birth of Moses: Foundation for the Birth of Abraham

If it is true that the pre-Islamic midrashim eschew the idea of a prophecy regarding Abraham's birth and, conversely, that the Islamic sources utilize it in order to demonstrate the patriarch's “pre-ordained” status, how then can one account for the motif's acceptance, albeit in somewhat altered form, among later midrashic works? Why would the later midrashic works open the door, even a crack, to a story-line involving divine election, a story-line that clashes with their basic principle of independent Abrahamic charisma? The prophetic Islamic narrative should have been excluded in its entirety from the midrashic corpus. Its inclusion, even in a modified format, allows for the possibility of error by less meticulous authors who might unwittingly

⁷⁰ Throughout his article, Ben-Shammai notes attempts by the Judeo-Arabic translator to ‘judaize’ the text by adding references to Biblical verses and terminology. See “*Sippurei Avraham*,” esp. 114.

⁷¹ The existence of a fair number of medieval and early modern Judeo-Arabic manuscripts on the Abraham-Nimrod cycle found in the National Library of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem shows that it was popular among lay-people, mostly in eastern communities.

allow the Islamically pre-ordained Ibrāhīm to slip in. The case of *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu*, which we have just examined, illustrates this point, demonstrating the ease with which confusion occurs when dealing with such similar texts and traditions. Therefore the question resounds: why would the medieval Jewish scholars allow for such a non-Jewish narrative to enter the Jewish corpus in the first place?

One cannot consider the extra-Scriptural pre-birth narratives of Abraham without considering the parallel provided by the more famous case of Moses, and it is here that the answer to the aforementioned puzzle may lie. Midrashically speaking, both Abraham and Moses are the sons of prominent fathers; as we have seen, Abraham's father ranged from royal astrologer to treasurer to military chief. Similarly, *BT Sotah 12b* maintains that Amram, Moses' father, was a leader among the Israelites. Both Abraham and Moses are members of a 'foreign' people; Abraham is a Hebrew among Chaldeans while Moses is an Israelite among Egyptians. Like his forefather Abraham, Moses' birth and rebellious future are foretold to the pagan king; the Egyptian ruler, in turn, strives to eliminate the child, as did the earlier pagan monarch. Nimrod and Pharaoh initially employ the same plan, ordering court-appointed midwives to kill any boy children born during the year mentioned in the prophecy. And in a similar fashion, both children avoid death when they are hidden by their parents and moved out of the clutches of the king and his henchmen. Ultimately both kings are defeated by the very children whose existence they attempted to prevent, as predicted.

The case of Moses bears significance for two important reasons: not only does the Moses account parallel the Abraham narratives, it predates them. And, unlike the Islamically influenced midrashic accounts of Abraham, these pre-Islamic narratives on Moses' birth demonstrate an organic exegetical connection to Scripture. In Moses' case, in other words, the somewhat problematic biblical text serves clearly as both the midrashic point of origin and object of explication. The case of the pre-Islamic Moses annunciation narratives clarifies the puzzling situation in which the Jewish sources would allow what appears at first glance to be a wholly non-Jewish narrative to penetrate its sacred corpus.⁷²

⁷² The annunciation of legendary figures who will grow to greatness and power appears in numerous cultures and literatures. See Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of*

A. Moses' Birth in the Bible

The biblical story of Moses' birth appears in the first two chapters of the book of Exodus, continuing the story begun in the previous book of Genesis. At the end of Genesis, famine strikes the land of Canaan, the homeland of Jacob and his family. In order to survive, the large group (70 people strong) moves to the land of Goshen in Egypt where Jacob's eleventh son, Joseph, has risen from the rank of slave to viceroy. After ending Genesis on a high, the beginning of Exodus opens on a sour note. As the narrative begins, Joseph has died and a new king has risen to the throne, one who "knew not Joseph." Noticing that Joseph's family has become many and mighty, the new Pharaoh fears they will form a fifth column, aligning with Egypt's enemies to fight against her from the inside. He decides to force the Hebrews into slavery in order to oppress them into submission. He also orders the Hebrew midwives, Shiphra and Pu'ah, to destroy any boy babies whose births they attend. Fearing God, the midwives do not heed Pharaoh's command. So Pharaoh issues an edict to throw any newborn boys into the Nile. While this is taking place, the narrative interrupts itself to inform us, a Levite man marries a Levite woman and she conceives. After giving birth to a boy, whom she notes is "good," the woman hides him at home for three months. When she sees she can no longer hide him, the woman builds for her son a waterproof ark, places him in it, and places it in the reeds that grow along the Nile River. The baby's elder sister goes down to the reeds to keep guard and see what befalls him. It is not long before the daughter of the Pharaoh comes down to the river to bathe at that very spot. Seeing the odd floating mini-ark, the princess sends her maids to fetch it and when they bring it back, she realizes that the child she finds inside is a child of the Hebrews. Thanks to some quick thinking on the part of the boy's sister, the princess unwittingly hires the baby's own mother as his wet-nurse and sends him home with her. When the child is weaned, his mother returns him to the palace where he becomes the princess' son. She names him Moses.

Folk-Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955–58), 5:46–53 (Motifs M300–339); Donald Redford, "The Literary Motif of the Exposed Child," *Numen* 14 (1967): 209–228. The specific case of Jesus is treated below.

B. *The Midrashic Annunciation of Moses*

The pre-Islamic Jewish midrashic narratives change around, or expand upon, the biblical details, telling of a prophetic prediction to a much-bothered pagan king of a soon-to-be-born rebellious monotheistic leader. The earliest and most detailed of these appears in the *Antiquities of the Jews* of the Jewish historian Josephus (circa 37–100 CE).⁷³ According to Josephus, one day a sacred scribe approached the king of Egypt and informed him that a child was soon to be born to the Israelites under his command, who, if reared to manhood, would raise the Israelites up and topple Egyptian dominion. The king grew exceedingly fearful and ordered all boys born to the Israelites thrown into the river to drown. In order to ensure the child's death, Pharaoh also sent Egyptian midwives to observe the Israelite births and enforce compliance with the royal decree. Josephus writes that a Hebrew man named Amram grew very 'uneasy' about the whole affair, as his wife was then pregnant and he feared for his unborn child, should it be a boy. He prayed to God to have mercy upon His loyal servants.⁷⁴ God came to him in his sleep and reassured Amram that no harm would befall his son, the child whom the Egyptians feared. Some time later when her due date arrived, Amram's wife Jochebed gave birth in secret and successfully hid the child at home for three months. When the child grew too big to be kept at home safely, Amram and Jochebed together built an ark, placed their son in it, and set it afloat on the Nile, where it eventually attracted the attention and protection of Pharaoh's daughter.

While Josephus' narrative initially appears to constitute merely a rather enjoyable and colorful supplement to the biblical text, it is actually the result of a combination of exegetical explanations of biblical verses.⁷⁵ The basic textual problem addressed here concerns the

⁷³ Josephus Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews*, in *The Works of Josephus. Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), II:9:2–5 (205–225). Josephus was not only a historian but also a *kohen* (Temple priest) who, according to his own admission, received a very thorough rabbinic education before becoming a military commander and, ultimately when the Romans defeated Israel, historian to the Roman throne. His work supports his claim of education.

⁷⁴ Unlike Terah, who is a known idolater in the extra-biblical Jewish sources, Moses' father is a loyal monotheist.

⁷⁵ A. A. Halevi maintains that this narrative finds its roots in an imperial Roman narrative on the emperor Augustus. According to this early Roman account, a few

particulars of Pharaoh's infanticidal decree. Namely, why does Pharaoh desire the death of all the boys but permits the girls to live? The Biblical text implies that Pharaoh intended to weaken the booming Israelite slave nation further and keep them under Egyptian control. "The people of the Children of Israel are more and mightier than we," he says to his people just before issuing his enslavement edict. "Come let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply and it come to pass that when any war should chance, they also join our enemies and fight against us and so go up out of the land (Ex. 1:10)." When Pharaoh notes that despite the enslavement the people continue to multiply, he moves on to phase two—infanticide (Ex. 1:11–16). Josephus' narrative claims otherwise. According to Josephus, Pharaoh was not concerned with fifth columns and internal spies, as he claimed he was. According to Josephus' reading, the king had received a prophecy of a specific problematic person who would overthrow him and was trying to kill this rival.

The later *Exodus Rabbah* (10th cent. CE)⁷⁶ restates more clearly the problem Josephus, or rather his sources, had with believing Pharaoh's words as a reflection of his true desires and plan: if he had truly desired to weaken the entire Israelite nation as he stated in Ex. 1:10, writes *Exodus Rabbah*, Pharaoh would have reduced the *female* population, not the male. After all, one man alone can impregnate innumerable women in a short period of time. One woman, however, can carry the seed of only one man at a time, producing a single child only once every nine months.⁷⁷ Fewer women, and not fewer

months prior to Augustus' birth, signs and symbols appeared to almost everyone that the king of Rome was to be born. The Senate immediately grew apprehensive and determined that no male child born that year was to be raised, but should be left to die. See A. A. Halevi, *Parshiot ba-Aggadah* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1973), 169. The Abraham narrative bears more in common with the Moses narrative than with that of Augustus. Unlike Augustus, neither Moses nor Abraham is a member of the ruling nation and both are more religious rebels than political. Furthermore, despite the similarities between the Moses and Augustus accounts, the midrashic Moses account remains organically connected to the biblical text for which it serves as exegesis, as is explained above.

⁷⁶ Avigdor Shinan, ed., *Shemot Rabbah 1–14* [Exodus Rabbah], (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1984), 1:14 (3). See also *Tanna de-Bei Eliyahu*, chapter 7. On the dating of *Exodus Rabbah*, see Appendix B.

⁷⁷ The Muslim texts likewise demonstrate dissatisfaction with the Pharaonic strategy; the Egyptians complain that killing the Israelite men would gravely deplete the slave population and cause labor problems. Fir‘awn relents and orders the killing of the males only every other year. Harūn (Aaron), Mūsā's elder brother, was born

men, result in fewer babies. Pharaoh's male-centered plan then was both inefficient and ineffectual. Therefore, reasoned the exegetes, logic dictates that there must have been some other issue, specific to the male population, which Pharaoh sought to root out. Based on his irrational strategy, the exegetes deduced that Pharaoh did not aim at destroying all the males, but one particular male. And, since the Biblical text proceeds directly from Pharaoh's infanticidal mandate (1:22) to the birth of Amram's son (2:1–2),⁷⁸ they understood that the specific child at whom the decree was aimed was Moses ben Amram.

BT Sotah 12a echoes Josephus' narrative and the implied exegetical dissatisfaction with the plain reading of the Scriptural text, similarly maintaining that the Egyptians received a prophecy of a redeemer and attempted to annihilate him by ordering all baby boys to the slaughter. However, the Talmud disagrees as to how precise the Egyptian information was and, in disagreeing, illuminates yet another implied textual difficulty that led to the creation of the narrative reported by Josephus. As the Talmud explains, “They [the Egyptians] saw and did not know what they had seen. They saw that ‘the mother of the redeemer of Israel had conceived him’ but they did not know if he was an Israelite or an Egyptian.”⁷⁹ The Egyptian half-knowledge extended to all parts of the prophecy, continues the Talmud. The Egyptians saw that the redeemer of Israel would meet his fate through water. They mistakenly assumed this meant that he would drown, hence the decision to throw the male infants into the waters of the Nile. In reality, points out the Talmud, Moses met his end *on account* of water, not *in* it. When he hit the rock in order to draw water, instead of speaking to it as he had been commanded,

during a permitted year while Mūsā was born during a forbidden year. See Ibn 'Asākir, 2:17–18; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 20:30 on Q 28:7; idem, *Ta'rikh*, 1:388 (1/447–8); Ibn Ishāq (d. 768 CE), in Gordon Newby's *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 121; and al-Tha'labī, 202. On the problems with Newby's methodology, see Lawrence Conrad, “Recovering Lost Texts: Some Methodological Issues,” *JAOS* 113 (1993): 258–263.

⁷⁸ Ex. 1:22, “And Pharaoh charged all his people saying: Every son that is born you shall cast into the river and every daughter you shall save alive.” (2:1) “And there went a man of the house of Levi and took to wife a daughter of Levi. (2) And the woman conceived and bore a son . . .”

⁷⁹ See also *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Va-Yaqhel*, 4.

Moses incurred upon himself God's wrath and He forbade him from entering the Land of Israel (Num. 20:7–13).

BT Sotah's interpretation hinges on a very close reading of the exact wording of Exodus 1:22, "And Pharaoh charged all his people saying: Every son that is born you shall cast into the river and every daughter you shall save alive" with an eye to the earlier decree of Ex. 1:16, "And he [Pharaoh] said: When you do the office of midwife to the Hebrew women, you shall look upon the birthstones; if it be a son, then you shall kill him but if it be a daughter, then she shall live." The Talmudists noted a subtle yet sharp difference between this second anti-baby decree (drowning) and the one issued six verses earlier. The initial command stated clearly that the midwives were to dispose of Israelites only, "When you do the office of midwife to the *Hebrew women*." The subsequent directive, however, seems to have been directed at the Egyptians as well; Pharaoh addresses "all his people" and he speaks of sons in general ("Every son that is born to *you*"), not Israelite sons in particular. Why, it seems the Talmudists reasoned, would Pharaoh issue what appears to be an edict against his own people? *BT Sotah* 12a explains: the Egyptians received a vision regarding the child's impending birth but, unlike Josephus' Egyptians, they did not truly understand what it was they had glimpsed. While they knew that the mother of the redeemer of Israel had conceived him, they could not tell if that child would be born to an Israelite or an Egyptian. Hedging his bets, the Egyptian ruler called for the annihilation of *all* the male children born in the kingdom.

Other Talmudic passages point out that the Egyptians were not the only people anticipating the redeemer's birth. Moses' elder sister Miriam received a similar prophecy, although hers indicated the child's identity by identifying his parents. As a young girl, relates the Talmud in tractate *Sotah*, Miriam would prophesy saying, "In the future my mother will give birth to a son who will redeem Israel."³⁰ Like the Egyptian astrologers, Miriam was aware that the redeemer of Israel would soon appear. However, whereas they understood only part of what they discovered, the little girl comprehended clearly what had been revealed to her.

³⁰ *BT Sotah* 11b, 12a, and 13a.

It is this terse and seemingly inconsequential passage about Miriam that provides yet another textual clue in understanding the exegetical need for the Moses-based prophecy that appears in both the Talmudic passages and in Josephus. According to Avigdor Shinan, the biography of the national folk-hero requires foreknowledge of his birth, an element we find in most of the folk-heroes who appear in the Bible, such as Isaac, Jacob, Samson, and Solomon. This same element remains glaringly absent from the Scriptural biography of the quintessential national hero Moses. The midrashists, Shinan maintains, aimed to correct this omission by creating a prophecy of Moses' birth and putting it in the mouth of his sister Miriam.⁸¹ While one can not discount Shinan's statement in the face of overwhelming evidence of such a pattern in ancient literature,⁸² neither should one understand it to constitute the only interpretation of the events. The prophecy concerning Moses' birth and Miriam's role as the revelatory medium are, in fact, organically and intrinsically related to the Biblical text and do not result only from a desire to fit Moses into the folk-hero format of the ancient world, as Shinan sees it.

The jumping-off point for the motif of Moses' nativity prophecy appears not in the Exodus passage on the Pharaonic persecution and Moses' birth but is an intertextual interpretation of a problematic verse elsewhere in Exodus. After the Israelites exit Egypt and successfully cross the Red Sea, they erupt into a song of thanks led by Moses (Ex. 14–15). Not to be outdone by their menfolk, the women celebrate with song and dance led by Miriam, Moses' sister. Exodus 15:20 recounts, "And Miriam the Prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances." This is the only time the Bible ever refers to Miriam as a prophetess and yet the text does not provide any information about her oracular status or activities, here or elsewhere. Why then does Scripture refer to her as a prophetess, and why precisely at this point in the Exodus narrative, where she is clearly dancing and not prophesying? Exodus 15:20 manifests yet

⁸¹ Shinan, *Shemot Rabbah*, 68.

⁸² For more on the hero myth, see Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, ed. Philip Freund (New York: Random House, 1932) and Lord Fitzroy Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1956).

another difficulty; if Miriam is the sister of Aaron, as labeled here, she is then *ipso facto* the sister of his brother Moses.⁸³ Why does the text mention one brother but not the other, especially in light of the fact that it is the not-mentioned brother's behavior that Miriam parallels with her singing?

The precise wording of the Talmudic episode of Miriam's prophecy in *BT Sotah* 13a provides the key to the mystery. In discussing Miriam as the guardian of her infant brother when he was placed at the river's edge, the Talmud teaches:

“And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron took, etc” [Ex. 15:20]. The sister of Aaron and not the sister of Moses? R. Amram said in the name of Rav. And some say R. Nahman said in the name of Rav: this teaches that she used to prophesy while she was the sister of Aaron, saying, “In the future my mother will give birth to a son who will redeem Israel.”

The description here of Miriam's age while prophesying appears quite clunky and strange. The Talmud could have said simply that she used to prophesy ‘while she was a little girl.’ In repeating the later biblical phrase, “the sister of Aaron,” regarding the child Miriam, the Talmud purposely leads the reader to Exodus 15:20 where the adult Miriam's description as Aaron's sister sits directly adjacent to her seemingly unwarranted status as prophetess. For the Talmud, the puzzling Scriptural wording in 15:20 indicated that the two issues were intrinsically related; Miriam's prophetic gift materialized while she was still the sister of Aaron only, Moses not having been born yet. Moreover, her prophecy related directly to her one-brother status; when she was younger and sister to only one boy, she had foretold the birth of another, the very one whose celebratory conduct she not so subtly was now (Ex. 15:20) matching in song and dance. The midrashic prophecy of Moses' birth derives organically from the Scriptural narrative and is not, as Shinan maintains, only a vehicle through which the exegetes fitted Moses into the national folk-hero genre.

⁸³ The Bible established the sibling status of Aaron and Moses earlier in the Exodus narrative, in 4:14. The Bible confirms that Aaron, Moses, and Miriam are full-siblings, children of the same two parents, in Numbers 26:59.

C. *From Moses to Mūsā*

The Islamic sources on Mūsā ibn ‘Imrān follow the format and storyline set up by the Bible and the exegetical pre-Islamic midrashim. Like the Bible, the Qur’ānic text (28:1–13) tells of the enslavement of the Children of Israel and the subsequent infanticidal decree. In response to the ruler’s murderous plan, Mūsā’s mother, here following Allah’s guidance, casts her son into the river where he is picked up by an unwitting female member of Fir‘awn’s family.

Like the Biblical narrative, the Qur’ānic narrative does not speak of a prophecy of any kind. One finds these details in the *tafsīr* and in the *qīṣāṣ*, just as one finds them in the midrash. According to the *tafsīr/qīṣāṣ* texts, Fir‘awn sees in a dream, or his priests inform him, that a child will be born among the Children of Israel and this child will cause his destruction. Fir‘awn then appoints Egyptian midwives over the Israelite women and commands them to kill all the newborn boys.⁸⁴ The extra-Scriptural Islamic narratives do not differ from the Jewish narratives in any way significant to the matter under discussion.⁸⁵ Rather, they demonstrate clearly the influence of the earlier Jewish narrative.

D. *From Mūsā to Ibrāhīm and Abraham*

It appears that it was here, in the Islamic realm, that the prophecy motif shifted from Moses/Mūsā to the earlier patriarch, Ibrāhīm. In order to understand why and how this should happen, one must

⁸⁴ For priestly initiative, see Mujāhid, 522; Muqātil, 3:336; ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī (744–827 CE), *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muṣṭafa Muṣlim Muḥammad (Riyad: Maktabat al-rushd, 1989), 2:87; al-Ya‘qūbī, 31–32; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:387 (1/445–446); idem, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 20:29; al-Mas‘ūdī, 1:54; al-Qummī, 2:135; Ibn ‘Asākir 2:16–17, 21–22; al-Kisā’ī, 200–201; Ibn Ishaq, 121. For Fir‘awn’s dream of a fire rising from Bayt al-Maqdis and overcoming the houses of Egypt and the subsequent interpretation, see al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:388 (1/447–448); idem, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 20:27; al-Majlīsī, 13:14–15; al-Tha‘labī, 202. Al-Kisā’ī’s Fir‘awn dreams of a man who repeatedly hits him over the head with a staff while he, Fir‘awn, sits on the royal throne (p. 200, citing Ka‘b).

⁸⁵ In one solitary case, Fir‘awn attempts to force the women to miscarry by torturing them, a horror of which Pharaoh is never accused. See al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:387–8 (1/446) (*isnād*: Ibn Ḥamīd—Salama—Muḥammad ibn Ishaq—‘Abdallāh ibn Abī Najīḥ—Mujāhid). Al-Tha‘labī repeats this, likewise in the name of Mujāhid (p. 202). This does not, however, refute claims of midrashic influence on the storyline.

understand and be aware of a number of factors. For Muslims, the point of the *qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’* and the *isrā’īliyyāt* was to demonstrate the continuity of the prophets through time, from Adam to Muḥammad. As Rippin notes, certain story-lines consequently appear in the biographies of multiple figures,⁸⁶ purposely creating a common history for the prophets and strengthening the Qur’ān’s role as spiritual guide. Additionally, according to Kugel’s theories of Biblical exegesis from which one can extrapolate here, oftentimes the original connection between a motif and the verse or situation it was designed to explain becomes lost and the motif attaches itself to something else, a *topos* Kugel terms a “transfer of affects.”⁸⁷ If an annunciation accompanies the birth of the prophet Mūsā, it is likely one would accompany the birth of the even greater universal prophet and forefather, Ibrāhīm. Indeed, Ishāq ibn Bishr alludes to the Mūsā narratives’ influence upon Ibrāhīm’s when he refers to Namrūd as “*Fir‘awn Ibrāhīm*,” Abraham’s Pharaoh.⁸⁸ In the annunciation motif’s transfer from the Biblical context to the Qur’ānic and then from Mūsā to Ibrāhīm, the narrative lost its specific verse-related exegetical component. The general concept of the prophet’s divinely ordained status, as demonstrated through a pre-natal oracle, was retained.⁸⁹

In a subsequent transfer of affects that occurred when Jews came under Islamic rule and influence, this non-Jewish application of the Moses/Mūsa motif to Ibrāhīm was accepted into the Jewish Abrahamic corpus precisely because of its recognizably Jewish character. It seems entirely plausible that the Jewish scholars recognized the motif of the pre-ordained Ibrāhīm as a variant on the Moses motif.⁹⁰ In other

⁸⁶ Andrew Rippin, “Interpreting the Bible through the Qur’ān,” 249–259.

⁸⁷ Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House*, 255.

⁸⁸ Ishāq ibn Bishr, 160a–b.

⁸⁹ The Qur’ān and the Islamic texts make this predestined-prophet ideal even more clear when stating that Mūsā’s mother’s idea to put her son in an ark on the river in order to save him from the murderous Egyptians was actually commanded by Allah (Q 28:7). Allah’s protection of the child He had chosen accompanied him even in infancy. This motif does not appear in the Ibrāhīm texts; Ibrāhīm’s parents had to figure out how to save the child by themselves.

⁹⁰ Jonathan Cohen, writing on the Jewish Moses nativity cycle, likewise envisions such a possibility. He declares that the annunciation and birth of Abraham in the rabbinic texts should be viewed as a variation on the theme of the Moses legends, to which scholars generally ascribe greater antiquity. His analysis, however, ignores the role of the Islamic material in the theme’s movement from Moses to Abraham. Furthermore, though Cohen notes that the Mosaic annunciation occurs well before the birth of the child and the Abrahamic annunciation occurs at the very moment

words, what looks like a non-Jewish motif resonated amongst the Jewish audience as *very* Jewish. If such a motif had been acceptable for Moses, it seems the midrashic compilers reasoned, it was valid to be told about Abraham as well, as the Muslims had done. Indeed, the midrash famously repeats similar positive stories about good people and attributes similar evil deeds to the evil.⁹¹ However, the exegetes would have noted one major problem in accepting this motif for Abraham as is and in its entirety. As it had reached them through the Islamic texts and the Islamic value system, the narrative depicted Abraham as a preordained figure. With the prophecy occurring before his conception, Abraham's entire life and existence depends upon and is determined by God. Pre-Islamic midrashic accounts, however, teach that Abraham's uniqueness was due not to divine determination but to his own character as a charismatic and independently minded agent of free-will. Recognizing and accepting this value, the midrashists altered the Muslim timing of the prophecy. When the vision *follows* his birth, it becomes more a recognition of what the child would become rather than a pre-programming of his behavior. When one alters the timing, one also alters the conceptualization of the figure of Abraham.

VI. *The Case of Jesus*

One can scarcely discuss the prophecy and birth of Abraham and Moses without at the very least making mention of the similar circumstances surrounding the birth of yet another famous religious reformer, Jesus. According to the first two chapters of the *Gospel of Matthew* (post-80 CE), Mary was engaged to marry Joseph, a scion of the royal house of David, when she found that she had become pregnant despite the fact that she was still a virgin. Suspecting infidelity, Joseph decided to break the engagement but was stopped by a dream visitation from an angel who informed Joseph that Mary

of his birth, he neglects to consider the significance of the difference. Jonathan Cohen, *The Origins and Evolution of the Moses Nativity Story* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), 105.

⁹¹ Eliezer Margaliyot deals with this midrashic characteristic at more length in his *Ha-Hayavim ba-Miqra ve-Zaka'im ba-Talmud u-va-Midrashim* (London: Arrarat, 1949–50).

was carrying a very special child, the child of the Holy Spirit, the redeemer about whom Isaiah had earlier prophesied (Is. 7:14). When Jesus was born, three Magi (Zoroastrian star-readers) noticed a star in the sky heralding the birth of the ‘King of the Jews’ and came to Jerusalem to find and worship him. Word of their message and mission eventually reached the ear of the Judean King Herod. Troubled by the news of the baby-king’s birth and its implications for his own dethronement, Herod directed the men to Bethlehem with orders to locate the child and report back to him so that he too, he claimed, could worship the newborn. Having reached Bethlehem, showering the infant with gifts, and bowing before him, the Magi received a warning in a dream not to report back to Herod and so they departed to their home country. After they took their leave, God appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to flee to Egypt, for Herod desired to kill the child. And so the small family departed secretly under the cover of night. Herod, in the meantime, discovered the trickery of the Magi and commanded the murder of all the children of Bethlehem under the age of two, the time-frame calculated by the three star-readers. Only after the paranoid Judean king died did Mary and Joseph return with their extraordinary son to Judea.

Many of the features of this infancy narrative correspond to elements in the extra-Scriptural narratives of Moses and Ibrāhīm. Unusual celestial occurrences or appearances, witnessed by star-readers, herald the births of all three children. In each case, the movement of the stars is understood to indicate the child’s special status as well as his specific threat to the ruling king. Namrūd, Pharaoh, and Herod all attempt to destroy the infants with a campaign of mass infanticide, but none succeeds. Additionally, all three children are whisked away to safety by a parental hand.⁹²

⁹² In his extensive treatment of Jesus in *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1977), Raymond Brown asserts that the Magi, Herod’s search for the infant Jesus, and the massacre of the children of Bethlehem are Christian reapplications of the Hebrew Bible account of Balaam, a ‘Magnus’ from the East who saw a star rise out of Jacob. Although he does not say so explicitly, it seems Brown is referring here to Balaam’s statement in Num. 24:17, “What I see for them is not yet, What I behold will not be soon: a star rises from Jacob, a scepter comes forth from Israel; it smashes the brow of Moab, the foundation of all the children of Seth.” How this section of the Hebrew Bible, Numbers 22–24, serves also as the source for the search for and massacre of the children, as Brown claims, is unclear to me.

Despite these similarities and the first century CE date of the *Gospel of Matthew*, placing it approximately contemporaneous with Josephus' work, Jesus' infancy narrative deviates too wildly in too many other details to provide a convincing case for it as the model after which the midrashic Moses or the Islamic Ibrāhīm were formed. In the first place, the fathers of both Moses and Ibrāhīm are mortal men whose identities are known and whose wives are actually their wives. Jesus, however, is sired by the Holy Ghost and carried in the womb of a virgin who, though betrothed, has not yet married. According to various texts already cited, both Amram and Azar hold positions of leadership, although they are not themselves royal. Joseph, on the other hand, retains a royal pedigree as a direct heir to the Davidic throne but serves no actual leadership role, official or otherwise. While Herod and Jesus belong to the same Judean ethnic and religious group, Namrūd, a Chaldean, and Pharaoh, an Egyptian, are idolaters threatened by monotheist Hebrews. Ibrāhīm's and Moses' births are reported directly to their kings and in some cases the kings themselves constitute the vessels through which the prophecy arrives. Herod, however, hears of the prophecy of Jesus' birth only after word of the Magi's search and activity reaches him through intermediaries. Unlike Namrūd's and Pharaoh's astrologers, the Magi did not consider it necessary to notify the king of the information they possessed. Neither Moses nor Ibrāhīm are ever worshiped by anyone, but the infant Jesus is. Additionally, while all three kings issue decrees of mass infanticide, only Herod neglects to enlist the help of midwives. Moses and Ibrāhīm escape the king's decree when their parents, relying on God's help, deposit them in the care of another; Moses' mother places him in an ark on the Nile where he is found by Pharaoh's daughter, and Ibrāhīm's mother gives birth to him in a cave and leaves him in the care of Allah. Neither Moses' nor Ibrāhīm's parents make any attempts to leave the country. Jesus' parents, however, do not relinquish custody of their son; rather, they themselves travel with him to safety in Egypt, at God's command, and remain there with him. Furthermore, both Moses and Ibrāhīm are born outside the land of Israel and are commanded by God to travel there only later in life, as adults. Conversely, Jesus is born in the land of Israel and, as a child, leaves in fulfillment of God's command to Joseph. He re-enters the land of Israel while still a child, once again in fulfillment of a divine command to his mortal foster-father.

All this is not to deny absolutely that *any* Christian or, more precisely, Hellenistic influences found their way into the Jewish or Muslim accounts. Rather, it is doubtful that Matthew's Jesus narrative served as the direct source or instigator of the synchronous midrashic and later Islamic narrative. The divergent details and the already established textual connection between the midrash and the biblical account support this impression. This suspicion is bolstered, furthermore, by the departure of the Islamic Īsa narratives from Matthew's Jesus account. In both the Qur'ān (sūras 3 and 19) and the extra-Qur'ānic material,⁹³ an angel conveys the prophecy of the Messiah's birth to Maryam (Mary) only. She initially mistakes him for a human and expresses a measure of alarm in greeting him.⁹⁴ Similarly, while the Christian report refers to Mary as betrothed, the majority of the Islamic texts make no mention of this.⁹⁵ Moreover, King Herod's role in the annunciation and in Jesus' early life is almost completely omitted from the Islamic Jesus renditions.⁹⁶ No pregnant women are watched, no children die, and for the most part the infant Īsa is not hidden or squirreled away to the safety of a foreign land.⁹⁷ These

⁹³ See for example, Muqātil, 1:275–6, 2:623, 3:158; al-Mas'ūdī, 1:70; al-Qummī 2:48–49; al-Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 19:17–22; Ibn 'Asākir, 47:348ff; Ibn Ishāq, 207; al-Majlisī, 14:206–225, 232; al-Tha'labī, 469–475. Al-Tha'labī mentions that the king searched for Maryam when he learned her son was the only *nabī* to be taken up to heaven by God (pp. 472–3).

⁹⁴ Al-Majlisī (14:217–218) includes an alternate version, in the name of Abū Ja'far ibn Babawayh in his *Kūtāb al-nubuwwa*, in which the Magi and their astrological foreknowledge appear.

⁹⁵ The exceptions occur in the heavily *isrā'iliyyāt*-laden Ibn Qutayba, 24–25 and al-Ya'qūbī, 74–75. Al-Ya'qūbī later refers to Joseph as Maryam's husband (pp. 75–76).

⁹⁶ The exception is al-Ya'qūbī (pp. 75–76), who mentions that Herod was the “king of Palestine” at the time and wanted to kill Jesus. He does not include a reason for Herod's murderous intent. Additionally, al-Ya'qūbī seems to have included two different versions, one resembling *Matthew* and the other resembling *Luke*. Ibn Qutayba maintains that the king at the time was Ahab, the husband of Jezebel (pp. 24–25). The story of Ahab and Jezebel appears in the Hebrew Bible in I Kings 16–22.

⁹⁷ Once again, the exceptions are Ibn Qutayba and al-Ya'qūbī. Ibn Qutayba notes that the family ran from Ahab and his wife Jezebel to Egypt (pp. 24–25). Al-Ya'qūbī reports that they ran away to Egypt to escape from Herod (pp. 75–75). Geoffrey Parrinder suggests that the Islamic versions of Jesus' birth relate more closely to the *Gospel of Luke*, which departs from the *Gospel of Matthew* and omits the same details as the Islamic narratives. He also points out the possible influence of the 8th cent. CE Latin apocryphal *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* on certain Qur'ānic details of Jesus' birth. See Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London: Faber

diverging details indicate Islamic ignorance of or a tendency toward rejection of the *Gospel of Matthew* and thus of an account of Jesus that bears any close similarity with those of Ibrāhīm and/or Mūsā.

Summary

The transfer of affects between Islam and Judaism is not always a clean process nor is the path traversed by these elements always clear, as the case of the sibyllic annunciation of Abraham demonstrates. While scholarship of the last century maintains that the Abrahamic nativity prophecy began as a midrashic story that left its marks on the Islamic narratives of Ibrāhīm, the texts themselves indicate the opposite. The pre-Islamic midrashic sources could not have influenced the later Islamic texts because the pre-Islamic midrashic sources contain no such material. Rather, the narratives of the patriarch's annunciation are an Islamic creation which was later accepted into post-Qur'ānic Judaism.

This is not to say, however, that the Islamic narratives are untouched by Jewish influence altogether. The account of Ibrāhīm's birth traces its roots back to biblical and pre-Islamic midrashic narratives of Moses' nativity and is not the "arbitrary precipitate of a world of oral-storytelling."⁹⁸ Born as an intertextual exegetical explanation of textual difficulties in the biblical book of Exodus, the Mosaic narrative then entered Islam as part of the biography of Moses' Islamic counterpart, Mūsā. At a certain juncture, the narrative was reformulated to fit the more universal prophet, Ibrāhīm, father of the Arabs. Eventually, the familiar-sounding narrative found its way back to the Jewish tradition as part of the biography of Abraham, father of the Jews.

However, though the post-Qur'ānic midrashic texts incorporated the Islamic Abraham narrative into their own collections, they first

and Faber, 1965), 77. *Luke's* birth of Jesus deviates even more wildly from the Islamic Mūsā and Ibrāhīm accounts than does *Matthew's*, and thus can not serve as its source either. A discussion of the earliest Arabic translation of the Gospels appears in Sydney Griffith, "The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century," *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985): 126–169.

⁹⁸ So Calder writes of al-Tha'labi's version in "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr . . .," 116.

tailored the account to fit their own values and ideals regarding the founding father and his personality. The midrashic compilers perceived the Islamic placement of the prophecy of Ibrāhīm’s birth and behavior prior to his actual conception as indicating an understanding of the patriarch as divinely ordained and subject to predestination. The midrashists could not accept such a characterization; the Jewish vision of the founding father sees him as determining his own course of action and his own destiny. Therefore, the midrashists subtly altered the timing of the prophecy. Instead of an oracle reporting a destiny that can not be averted or changed, the midrashic prophecy, which occurs only after the child has already been born, becomes more a recognition—and not pre-programming—of that child’s wondrous and uniquely strong character.

CHAPTER TWO

INDEPENDENT INTELLECT OR ‘RIGHTLY GUIDED’: THE PATRIARCH DISCOVERS GOD

After the narratives of the birth of the forefather, the next episode to greet the reader of Abraham’s/Ibrāhīm’s biography concerns the patriarch’s discovery of God. Both the Muslim and the Jewish traditions report that though Ibrāhīm/Abraham was raised by observant and active pagans, he began to ponder the matter of the identity of his Master and Creator. He turned to the material elements of the world for clues and signs. He looked into the heavens and noted the brightness of the sun, the moon and the stars. Mistaking each for his Lord, he worshiped each in turn, comprehending his error only when that element set. Ultimately, he realized his folly and understood that the material elements were but servants to and signs of the true God. From that moment on, the forefather forswore idolatry and paganism and worshiped the one true God alone.

Once again, the Islamic and Jewish sources relate accounts so similar that one could easily confuse one tradition’s narrative for the report of the other. This hardly seems surprising, however, when one takes into account that these narratives constituted an attempt by both traditions to deal with and answer the very same question: how did Abraham/Ibrāhīm come to believe in God the Creator while his family and his people, indeed the rest of the world, worshiped only the created? How did he learn the truth while inculcated with error? In both traditions, the answer relies on the same idea: the movements of the celestial spheres, which his people mistakenly worshiped as their gods, inspired an observant Abraham to contemplate the nature of both the universe and of God and the logic of his countrymen’s beliefs. As such, Abraham concluded that the celestial bodies were not themselves deities but signs of God the Creator.

I. *Pre-Islamic Jewish Narratives and Celestial Contemplation*

As in the case of the prophecies of Abraham's birth, Biblical information regarding Abraham's character development and religious beliefs is non-existent. After an extensive genealogical list that culminates in Abraham and his brothers, Nahor and Haran, Genesis 11 provides only sketchy facts about the man and his family: Haran died in Chaldea before his father; Abraham and Nahor married but Abraham's wife proved barren; Terah moved his clan to Haran where he then died. In the next chapter, for no apparent or explained reason, God appeared to Abraham, instructed him to leave his homeland, vowed to make him the father of a blessed and great nation, and promised him that his descendants would inherit Canaan.

The post-Biblical narrative expansions¹ and their authors found the events as described in Genesis problematic, as should the modern reader. Specifically, the Biblical text provides neither explanation of nor reason for Abraham's sudden relationship with the Divine or for his role as recipient of divine favor. Indeed, having read the Biblical text on Abraham's life before God's summons, the alert reader invariably remains wondering: of all the people then on earth, why did God choose Abraham? What was special about *him*? As the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, Philo (20 BCE–50 CE), phrased it, "What good thing had Abraham already done, that He bids him estrange himself from fatherland and kindred there and dwell in whatever land God Himself may give him?"² The narrative expansions come to explain: though raised by and among idolaters and pagan astrologers, Abraham rejected their false religion. He analyzed the world around him, specifically the heavens, and concluded that God did not lie in astrology but was external to it. And so, he turned to worship God Himself. In return, God rewarded his loyalty and faith with divine blessings and care.

¹ Kugel employs this term to refer to retellings of biblical narratives in which 'extra' details not found in the biblical text find their way into the later compositions. See Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 276. Since the term may be aptly used for the Muslim retellings of Qur'anic episodes as well, I have employed it in dealing with the Islamic material below.

² Philo's *Leg. All.*, III, 77ff. Noted and translated by Samuel Sandmel in his "Abraham's Knowledge of the Assistance of God," *HTR* 44 (1951): 138.

A. *Jubilees and Josephus*

Perhaps the earliest Jewish account of the forefather's search for and discovery of the Deity occurs in the *Book of Jubilees*,³ a non-Pharisaic Palestinian apocryphal composition dating from the era between the death of King Johanan Hyrcanus and the rise of King Herod (c. 135–96 BCE).⁴ According to *Jubilees*, Abraham's heavenly meditations constituted only one of a number of incidents along the path to his renouncing paganism and embracing the truth.

At the tender age of two weeks, the newborn Abraham recognized the falsity of the idol-worship in which his family and his people engaged, records *Jubilees* without explaining further. Not wanting to be influenced by his pagan father, Abraham separated himself from him and began to pray to the "Creator of all things."⁵ Life went on and, as a young man, Abraham took to arguing with his father, pointing out that the idols, products of Terah's own creation, profited no one. The true God, he insisted, the Creator, He Who causes the dew to fall, benefits all mankind.⁶ His arguments, however, fell on deaf ears. At the age of 60, no longer able to abide the idolatry of his people, Abraham secretly entered the town's idol house one night and set it afire, destroying all the statues inside. After this incendiary assault, Abraham and Terah left Ur of the Chaldees and moved to Canaan. Sitting outside one clear evening, Abraham looked up and began gazing at the stars in the Canaan night sky, in order to determine what the character of the year would be with regard to the rains. While sitting and watching the heavens, he realized with sudden alacrity the falsity of the astrologically based worship in which his people and his countrymen engaged. "All the signs of the stars and the signs of the moon and of the sun are all in the hand of the Lord," Abraham declared. "Why do I search them out?" That very night, he prayed to God and declared his loyalty to Him.⁷

³ *Book of Jubilees*, trans. O. S. Wintermute, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1985), v. 2.

⁴ *EJ*, s.v. "Jubilees, Book of" by Yehoshua Grintz (10:324–326). See also Charlesworth's introduction to *Book of Jubilees*.

⁵ *Jubilees*, 11:16.

⁶ *Jubilees*, 12:1–6.

⁷ *Jubilees*, 12:16–20. Note that Abraham had *already* turned to God when, as a newborn, he separated from his father (11:16). David Flusser points out that a

The narrative of Josephus, the Hellenistic Jewish historian of the subsequent century (37–100 CE), likewise refers to Abraham’s heavenward gaze as instrumental in his discovering God.⁸ Though *Jubilees* delays the episode until after Abraham’s departure from Chaldea, for Josephus it serves as the very impetus for the patriarch’s emigration.⁹ Chronology notwithstanding, Josephus follows *Jubilees*’ lead in attributing Abraham’s discovery of his Lord to his interest in the skies.

Josephus prefaces his narrative with a laudatory statement about the character of what is to him this most impressive of forefathers. Abraham, he describes, was a person of superior intellect and understanding, the first person to publicly proclaim the notion that there was but one God and that He was the Creator of the universe. Abraham derived these monotheistic beliefs, Josephus explains, from the irregular phenomena “visible both at land and at sea, as well as those that happen to the sun and the moon and all the heavenly bodies.” In other words, Abraham reasoned that if these elements possessed powers of their own, as his astrologically worshiping compatriots maintained, they would remain stable, steady and constant. As Abraham noted, however, the very nature of the celestial spheres stands in contrast to this; they rise and set at the beginning and end of each day, submitting to either the cover of darkness or the light of day without being able to overcome either. Their irregular nature, Josephus’ Abraham deduced, demonstrates their subservience to one greater than they who commands them.¹⁰ To this being alone, he

Jubilees-influenced version of this episode appears in the Christian anthology of Old Testament historical legends known as “*Palaea Historica*” (post-9th century CE), a source not utilized by Louis Ginzberg in his *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909–1938). See David Flusser, “*Palaea Historica*: An Unknown Source of Biblical Legends,” in *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature*, eds. J. Heinemann and D. Noy (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1971), 53.

⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, I:7:1 (154–157).

⁹ According to Genesis, Abraham moved to Canaan at God’s command. In other words, at the time of his move, Abraham was already cognizant of and conversant with his Lord. Josephus’ order of events, in which Abraham first recognizes God and then moves to Canaan, echoes this more closely than does *Jubilees*, in which Abraham moves to another land and *then* discovers God.

¹⁰ According to Louis Feldman, Josephus’ version of Abraham’s proof of God’s existence derives from Abraham’s altering the Platonic and Stoic argument for God’s existence, which is based on the regularity of the celestial phenomena, into an argument based on certain observed irregularities (p. 229). Additionally, Feldman maintains (p. 232) that the association of Abraham’s discovery of God with contemplation

declared, it is proper to offer thanksgiving and honor. When the Chaldeans and other Mesopotamians learned of these outrageous views, they raised a tumult against Abraham, whereupon he escaped, thinking it prudent to leave the country.¹¹

B. Apocalypse of Abraham, *Genesis Rabbah*, and *Philo Judeas*

The theme of Abraham's skyward directed contemplations appears to fall out of usage in the Jewish exegetical milieu at the end of the first century CE. Abraham's celestial search appears in neither the canonical nor the apocryphal material that date to this era. The midrashic sources continued to ponder the question of how Abraham, raised by and among pagans, came to embrace the monotheistic concept of God the Creator. However, beginning in the last years of the first century CE—as we will see in the narratives of the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Genesis Rabbah* and *Philo Judeas*—the answer no longer includes celestial contemplation. When this later Abraham refers to the astral spheres, he does so only as part of his polemics against idolaters. He himself attains gnosis through the logical contemplation of other factors.

Like *Jubilees*, the pseudepigraphical second century CE *Apocalypse of Abraham* records a series of incidents that lead to Abraham's break

of the heavenly spheres is related to two ideas. One consists of the traditional depiction of Abraham as an astronomer par excellence (see Gen. 15:5–6 in which God tells Abraham to count the stars). This is then coupled with the traditional belief in the Chaldeans as the founders of astronomy and astrology (for example, *Jubilees*, 8:2–4 and 11:7–8). See Louis Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). See also Menahem Kister, "Observations on Aspects of Exegesis, Tradition, and Theology in Midrash, Pseudepigrapha, and Other Jewish Writings," in *Tracing the Threads: Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha*, ed. John C. Reeves (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), p. 23, n. 24.

¹¹ According to Wilfred L. Knox, the earliest Hellenistic Jewish source is not Josephus but the Orphic fragment quoted by Aristobulus (mid-second century BCE), as preserved by the Church Father Eusebius, in which an unnamed scion of the Chaldean race comes to a vision of God through his knowledge of the stars. Knox notes additionally that Josephus' narrative bears a striking resemblance to the fragments of Berossus, a 3rd century BCE Babylonian priest of Bel. According to Knox's own admission, the heroes of both Aristobulus and Berossus remain unnamed; later readers presumed Abraham to be the hero of both. See Knox, "Abraham and the Quest for God," *HTR* 28 (1935): 56.

Additionally, Kister maintains that Josephus' description of Abraham as some sort of astrologer results from an attempt to Judaize a non-Jewish hero. Kister does not provide the non-Jewish version he claims has been subjected to Judaization. See Kister, "Observations on Aspects of Exegesis," Appendix 1.

from his father's idolatrous tradition.¹² However, while *Jubilees* ends Abraham's search for his Maker with the patriarch's investigation of the upper realms of the universe, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* describes a more earthbound directed gaze. Abraham refers to the celestial elements here as part of his polemics against idol-worshippers; they do not constitute any part of the method through which he himself discovers God.

According to this very detailed and engaging text, Abraham began to question the truth of his religion when his father, an idol-maker by trade, sent him out as a traveling salesman of the family wares. While Abraham was on the road, three of the idols which he was carrying were crushed, becoming unsellable. Abraham disposed of them by throwing them into the nearby River Gur where he watched in silence as the shattered gods sunk down to the bottom. On the way home, Abraham began considering this incident in light of other events he had already witnessed. What is this inequality in which my father participates, he reasoned; is *he* not the God of his gods since *he* creates *them*? He recalled the case of Marumath, a large stone god who had fallen over one afternoon while Abraham was serving him. Abraham had been unable to right him by himself and called for his father's help. When they finally stood the large idol up, they realized the god's head had cracked and fallen off and so Terah carved him a new one from different material. Marumath, Abraham now recalled, could not even prevent himself from falling over and losing his head! Now he sports the body of one idol and the head of another, *provided by my father!* Similarly, these latest three idols could not prevent themselves from shattering and then they could not retrieve their shards from the water into which I threw them!¹³

In a conversation with his father on his return home, the disenchanted young merchant tried to convince Terah of his own divinity, a proposal that angered Terah. In an attempt to quiet his son, Terah sent Abraham out to gather wood chips and light a fire for

¹² *The Apocalypse of Abraham*, trans. R. Rubinkiewicz, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 1:689ff. (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1983).

¹³ *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 1:1–9. According to Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5:217 (n. 49), Marumath derives from the Hebrew verb מחרמת (mehoremet) or מהוימת (mehuremet), from the verb, מחרם (hmr), “to excommunicate” or “to dedicate.”

dinner. Abraham found a small wooden god, Barisat, among the chips and placed it in charge of the fire. He then stepped out to ask his father a question about the food. Upon returning, Abraham found that Barisat had fallen feet first into the flames and was burning fiercely. Struck by the absurdity of the scene, Abraham began to laugh uncontrollably and by the time he composed himself the little idol was incinerated. At dinner Abraham sarcastically informed his father that Barisat had given his life for the meal, to which Terah replied: Great is the power of Barisat! I will carve another one today and tomorrow he will prepare my food as well! Shocked by his father's "stupidity of spirit," Abraham could no longer hold his peace. First he attacked the illogic inherent in having more and less expensive gods. Your gods, he reasoned with Terah, are worth less than others for yours are made of wood and stone and not of gold. Moreover, YOU create them and then they fall over and burn their faces off anyway. He then attacked the rationale of worshiping the natural elements altogether. Fire is more powerful than your gods, he argued, because things perish in it. But water is more powerful than fire for it puts out the flames. The earth swallows the water, so it is more powerful, but the sun dries the earth so it must be more powerful. Indeed the sun illuminates the whole universe. But, it is overcome by darkness and by the moon and the stars. These too however sometimes dim at night. No, he reasoned finally, the God Who created all things, He alone is God! Would that He reveal Himself to us! And indeed, while Abraham was thinking these loyal monotheistic thoughts, the voice of God came down in a stream of fire and spoke to him.¹⁴

Like the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Genesis Rabbah* (5th century CE) records Abraham's utilization of the natural elements as part of his polemics rather than as part of his discovery. When called before the king to explain his sacrilegious non-compliance with the state's pagan religion, Abraham engaged Nimrod in a mini-disputation. Aware of the king's worship of fire, Abraham challenged him. Let us worship water, he suggested to the regent, for it extinguishes fire and therefore must be a more powerful deity. The king agreed. Wait, Abraham continued, let us worship the clouds for they carry the water. Again, Nimrod agreed. Well, persisted Abraham, let us worship

¹⁴ *Apocalypse of Abraham*, chapters 2–7.

the wind for it disperses the clouds. We will bow down before the wind, the king said. No, said Abraham, let us worship man for he withstands the wind and is not moved by it. You speak nonsense, cried the annoyed king, I worship fire (עֵגֶל, *ur*) and I will throw you into it; let the god whom you worship come and save you from it!¹⁵

Abraham's discovery of God in *Genesis Rabbah* depends not on his observation of heavenly bodies, which do not appear even in the list of things to which he refers in his polemics, but on his contemplation of more earthbound concerns. In 39:1, R. Isaac explains, using a parable: Abraham resembled a traveler who came upon a large mansion engulfed in flames. The traveler asked himself, "Could one say that this elegant and well-cared for mansion, which was obviously built by a man of means and intelligence, has no owner or guardian?"¹⁶ The owner then looked out and revealed himself to the traveler. So too Abraham looked at the world around him and proclaimed, "Can one say that this world, so precisely and wondrously executed, exists without a master?"¹⁷ In response to His servant's faith and loyalty, God revealed Himself to Abraham. As in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, and contrary to Josephus and *Jubilees*, Abraham reaches his conclusions regarding God by looking at the workings of the lower realm. The planets and the stars play no role here.

In his philosophical analysis of Abraham's monotheistic revelation, the Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher Philo (20 BCE–50 CE) frames the issue with similar imagery. Abraham, teaches Philo, was reared among Chaldean idol-worshippers but was able to perceive what the Chaldeans could not. He realized the Truth when

opening the soul's eye as though after profound sleep, and beginning to see the pure beam instead of the deep darkness, he followed the ray and discerned what he had not beheld before, a charioteer and

¹⁵ Theodor and Albeck, eds., *Midrash Rabbah Bereishit* [Genesis Rabbah], 38:10. This will appear in the footnotes as *Genesis Rabbah*. The similarity between this passage and the more general statement in the Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra* 10a (codified in the 6th century CE), is unmistakable. Ginzberg (*Legends*, 5:210 n. 16) suggests that the original format might have looked more like the Talmud's version. See appendix to Chapter Two.

¹⁶ Literally, מַנְהִיג (manhig), a leader, guide.

¹⁷ In other versions presented by the editors in the notes, R. Isaac draws a parallel between the house engulfed in flames and the world engulfed in the sin of idolatry from which Abraham broke free. See Theodor-Albeck commentary to 39:1.

pilot presiding over the world and directing in safety his own work and of all such parts of it as are worthy of the divine care.¹⁸

As in *Genesis Rabbah*, Philo's Abraham takes note of the machinations of the world around him. From this, he too understands the world as an apparatus controlled by its master, a "charioteer and pilot" who determines its movements and manipulations. Though neither *Genesis Rabbah*'s Abraham nor Philo's Abraham actually glimpses the Creator with his own eyes, they both comprehend that He exists nonetheless. They discern clearly that the magnificent natures of His orderly creations testify to His rule.

C. *Yose ben Yose ha-Payyetan*

Though the motif of Abraham's contemplation of the astrological elements faded from both the non-canonical and early rabbinic sources, it never vanished fully from Jewish tradition. Indeed, our theme resurfaces not in the exegetical material but in the liturgical poetry (*piyyutim*) of the 4th–5th century CE Palestinian liturgical poet (*payyetan*), Yose ben Yose.¹⁹ *Piyyutim* were lyrical compositions intended to supplement prayers or other religious ceremonies but often they simply replaced the set liturgy. In the period to which Yose ben Yose belongs, lyric poets began to assimilate midrashic elements into their compositions as a matter of course.²⁰ In ancient times, fierce opposition to *piyyut* literature arose from official rabbinic quarters. The academies in Babylonia, the ancient authority on what was religiously acceptable and what was not, stood at the forefront of the *piyyut* rejection movement. Despite official condemnation however, use of *piyyutim* continued in many of the eastern communities.²¹ This lay acceptance led to the preservation or reemergence of sometimes lost or discarded midrashic material, as appears to be the case with the motif of Abraham's astral discovery of his Lord.

¹⁸ F. H. Coulson, trans., *Philo* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1935), 6:41. Note the similarity between this passage and the parable of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. See Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1992), Book VII. For more on the Platonic philosophy of Philo, see Coulson or *EJ*, s.v. "Philo Judeas," by Yehoshua Amir (13:409–415).

¹⁹ Yose ben Yose, *Piyyutey Yose ben Yose* [Yosse ben Yosse: Poems], 2nd ed., ed. Aharon Mirsky (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1991).

²⁰ Yose ben Yose, 23.

²¹ *EJ*, s.v. "Piyyut," by Ezra Fleischer (3:574–602, especially 602).

In a composition entitled “*Azkir Gevurot*” (“I Will Recall the Wonders”),²² a supplement to the ritual descriptions of the High Priest’s actions and responsibilities on the Day of Atonement and recited then,²³ Yose ben Yose portrays an Abraham who strove to understand “the secret of creations that act as following a ruler” by watching the movements of the sky. He watched the sun setting and rising, going out in the morning “eager as a warrior and returning weak.” He saw the “windows of the sky in the east and the west” through which the moon “leaps” on a daily basis. And, he observed the arrows of lightening and the brilliance of the stars which rose every evening and set every morning without one ever becoming absent. After observing all this, “the confused one” became wise; he understood that the behavior exhibited by the heavenly lights betrayed their created, not creating, status. As Yose ben Yose writes, Abraham gained religious insight and reasoned: “These have a master and I will follow Him.”

II. *The Islamic Sources and the Stars*

Though the post-1st century CE rabbinic sources began to turn away from depicting *Abraham*’s discovery of God through heavenly contemplation, the Islamic sources of the subsequent centuries reveled in precisely this description of *Ibrāhīm*’s conversion. For the Muslim exegetes, no scenario other than the astral one existed to explain the forefather’s transformation from pagan to true believer. Rather, from the very early *mufassirūn* (exegetes) through the medieval, Muslim scholars recounted *Ibrāhīm*’s contemplation and worship of the skies as part of his search for God. In fact, the Muslim sources went one step further in their depictions: *Ibrāhīm* not only contemplates the nature of the celestial spheres as Abraham does, *but temporarily mistakes them for his Lord and worships them*.

²² Yose ben Yose, 141. A translation of the entire pericope (portions of which are quoted here), translated mostly by M. Kister in his “Observations on Aspects of Exegesis,” n. 28, appears in the appendix to Chapter Two.

²³ Yose ben Yose, 8.

A. In the *Qur'ān*

The consistency with which the Muslim sources relate this motif can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that, unlike the prophecy narrative of Ibrāhīm's birth, Ibrāhīm's discovery of God appears outright in the Islamic Scripture. As F. E. Peters noted in his study of the origins of Islam, the Qur'ānic text is more "generous" than the Bible in providing details of Ibrāhīm's "conversion" to the worship of the One True God.²⁴ Though Peters does not point to Ibrāhīm's celestial contemplation specifically, choosing instead to highlight the patriarch's destruction of the idols, his statement rings true of our motif nonetheless. This earliest of Muslim sources on the matter depicts Ibrāhīm's worship of the astral objects as part of his contemplation of them and of Allah's nature. As the Qur'ān describes (Q 6:76–80):

(76) When night came down upon him, he saw a star; said he: "This is my Lord" but when it vanished, he said: "I love not the things which vanish." (77) Then when he saw the moon shining forth, he said: "This is my Lord," but when it vanished, he said: "Truly, if my Lord had not guided me,²⁵ I would have been of the people who go

²⁴ Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, 2.

²⁵ The *Qur'ān*, trans. Richard Bell (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960). Though Bell (as well as Pickthall) employs the present tense, "guide me," Muhammad Zafrullah Khan and Ahmed Ali utilize the past tense in their translations. See *The Qur'ān*, trans. Muhammad Zafrullah Khan (London and Dublin: Curzon Press, 1975) and *Al-Quran: A Contemporary Translation*, trans. Ahmed Ali (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). While the rules of grammar governing the word أَن leave room for interpreting the sentence in the present tense, the past tense appears to convey more accurately the meaning of the Arabic ("لَنْ لَمْ يَهْدِنِي رَبِّي لَا كُونَنْ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ"). According to Wright (2:22.12), "The jussive of the imperfect (*al-mudāri'* *al-majzūm*) when dependant upon adverbs لَمْ and لَمَا has invariably the meaning of the perfect." Regarding the difference between لَمْ and لَمَا, he notes (2:23, rem.) that لَمْ is the negation of the past tense, فَعَلَ, while لَمَا فَعَلَ is the negation of (meaning, 'he has not yet done something but will certainly do so in the future')." He furthermore states (2:15.6b) that if "the words إِنْ (*inna*), أَيْ (*ayyu*) etc. be followed by two clauses, the first expressing the condition and the second the dependant result, the verbs of both clauses are put in the perfect, both condition and result being represented as having taken place." Wright then gives examples that use the perfect form in the Arabic. Based on this, it would appear that the negative of such sentences with إِنْ and أَيْ would take the jussive form. Indeed, this is the form that appears in the Qur'ānic verse above. Hence, I have chosen the past tense translations, which appear to be more accurate according to the rules set out in Wright. See W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, 3d ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

astray.” (78) Then when he saw the sun shining forth, he said: “This is my Lord, this is greater,” but when it vanished, he said: “O my people, I am quit (clear) of what ye associate (with Allah).”²⁶

Like the Abraham of the earlier texts of *Jubilees* and *Josephus*, Ibrāhīm looked to the heavens in his search for the Divine. As in Yose ben Yose’s text, he examined each of the three bodies (the sun, moon, and stars) and, like Abraham, quickly realized the falsity of attributing divinity to a thing inconstant and overpowered. Ultimately he realizes the same of his people’s worship of idols. In contrast to his compatriots, Ibrāhīm understood that the true God is He Who created heaven and earth, separate from the world He created and not part of it.²⁷

B. Post-*Qur’ānic* Islamic Sources

Although Ibrāhīm’s theological revelation appears in detail in the *Qur’ān*, Muslim exegetes of the following centuries did not refrain from telling and retelling the narrative in their own words. In so doing, scholars often modified some of the Scriptural details. These emended narrative expansions fall into three general categories. Some authors simply provided a geographical context for the episode, though the *Qur’ān* provides no such information. Others presented a more biographically oriented context; these authors recorded conversations between Ibrāhīm and his parents that lead to his astral meditations, though, again, the *Qur’ān* makes no such reference. Other sources reversed the order of the events noted in the *Qur’ān*.

²⁶ Interestingly, Ali translates the passage so as to remove all traces of inappropriate pagan behavior from the forefather. He places the idolatrous utterances into the mouth of Ibrāhīm’s father. According to Ali, the passage reads, “When night came with her covering of darkness he saw a star and (Azar, his father) said: This is my Lord. But when the star set, (Abraham) said: I love not those that wane, etc.” None of the *mufassirūn* surveyed here, however, give this as a possible reading.

²⁷ Youakim Moubarac argues that the *Qur’ānic* Ibrāhīm, despite the *Qur’ān*’s claims, does not present one iota of proof for the existence of his God but proves only the falsity of idol worship. Ibrāhīm, he maintains, merely affirms and testifies to God’s existence, much as a martyr (*shahid*) does. Moubarac attributes this to the already believing status of Muḥammad’s audience; Muḥammad’s Ibrāhīm did not have to prove God’s existence because Muḥammad was literally preaching to the converted. See Youakim Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran: l’histoire d’Abraham dans le Coran et la naissance de l’Islam* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1958), 110–113. This argument could be equally applied to the Jewish and post-*Qur’ānic* Islamic narratives on the topic as well.

Despite these differences, the *mufassirūn* throughout the ages remained true to the basic Qur'ānic idea: Ibrāhīm, in his search for his Lord, looked to the heavens and worshiped a star, then the moon, and then the sun until finally he came to the worship of the true God.

Of the three modifications in the post-Qur'ānic Islamic narratives concerning Ibrāhīm's astrological discovery of his Lord, the most commonly added detail concerns the geographic location of the episode. As noted earlier, the Qur'ān omits any mention of where the narrative took place, saying only "When night came down upon him . . ." (6:76). Unsatisfied with this vagueness regarding such an important theological occurrence, the exegetes took it upon themselves to provide a more precise context. In determining a location, they based themselves on the earlier events in Ibrāhīm's life. Specifically, a number of scholars noted that, according to his aforementioned (extra-Qur'ānic) biography, the patriarch had been born in a cave and had been hidden underground as a child in order to avoid the death sentence that had been imposed on all newborn boys.²⁸ They logically inferred that Ibrāhīm's contemplation of the star, the moon, and the sun must have occurred upon his departing from his subterranean childhood home. Born and raised in a cave, he most likely had not had any previous opportunity to view the skies and the spheres contained within them. This precise scenario appears in the work of al-Ṭabarī (838–923 CE), on the authority of Ibn Ishāq, among other exegetes.²⁹ When Ibrāhīm reached 15 months of age, al-Ṭabarī relates, he was released from the cave in which he had been born. Upon exiting, he contemplated the heavens and said, "He Who created and sustained me is my Lord." He looked up and noted a bright star shining in the night sky and began to worship it, taking it for his Lord. When it set, he declared, "I like not those that set." He then noticed the moon rising and, thinking it to be God, worshiped it. When it set, he once again distanced himself from such false worship, declaring, "If my Lord had not guided me, I would have been among the erring people." When he saw the sun on the morrow he said, "Ah, this is the biggest, surely it is my Lord."

²⁸ See the previous chapter for the narratives of Ibrāhīm's birth.

²⁹ Al-Ṭabarī (838–923 CE), *Ja'mi' al-bayān*, 7:249; idem, *Ta'rīkh*, 1:235 (1/255). See also al-Ya'qūbī (d. 897 CE), 21–22; al-Mas'ūdī (896–956 CE), *Murij al-dhahab*, 1:50; al-Majlisī (d. 1698 CE), *Bihār*, 11:87 and 12:18–19.

And, as in the Qur'ān, when it too set, he repudiated his earlier declarations and turned to the worship of Allah alone.³⁰

Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (c. 713–767 CE) places the episode one step earlier, while Ibrāhīm was still in the tunnel.³¹ In addition to providing a geographic backdrop for the event, Muqātil, like al-Tabarī, thus provides also a chronological setting, one not in the Qur'ānic narrative. In Muqātil's depiction, the astral episode forms the final step in Ibrāhīm's attainment of divine gnosis, just as in the non-canonical midrashic *Book of Jubilees*. Here, the process begins with a charming and seemingly innocent conversation between the youth and his mother. Sitting in the tunnel one day, the child Ibrāhīm turned to his mother and, apropos of nothing, asked "Who is my Lord?" Immediately she replied, "Why, I am." The child considered this response for a moment and then continued, "Well then, who is your Lord?" Unfazed, his mother replied, "Your father is." Immediately Ibrāhīm answered, "Who is his Lord, then?" At this, his mother grew concerned, slapped him across the face and told him to be quiet. Later that evening she reported the conversation to her husband, adding that she found herself convinced that their child was the boy of the prophecy, the child who would change their religion. Though Ibrāhīm had not yet unearthed the truth about Allah, his questioning worried his parents. Needing to see for himself, Ibrāhīm's father went to the tunnel to speak with his son and the conversation repeated itself. Like his wife, Ibrāhīm's father ultimately quieted his son by slapping him across the face. After Ibrāhīm's questions resulted in nothing but parental rebuke, Allah revealed Himself to Ibrāhīm and showed him the divine realm, the Kingdom of Heavens and Earth.³²

One evening sometime after this, while standing at the entrance to the tunnel, continues Muqātil, Ibrāhīm looked into the sky and noticed the bright star, Venus.³³ Taking the brightness of the planet

³⁰ For Ibrāhīm's statements, al-Tabarī quotes the Qur'ān verbatim.

³¹ Muqātil, 1:570–1 (on Q 6:74–82).

³² Allah's revealing the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth to Ibrāhīm takes place in Q 6:72–3. Muqātil alters the account somewhat, however. The Qur'ān records that the conversation between Ibrāhīm and his father concerned his father's worship of useless idols and was not, as Muqātil reports below, a more general discussion of the hierarchy of power.

³³ Al-Tabarī and the Qur'ān refer to the star as simply a "bright star." Other authors specify, speaking of this first 'god' as either Venus (الزهرا, *al-Zuhara*) or

as a sign of its divinity, Ibrāhīm began to worship it. In the morning, the star set; that is, it disappeared during daylight. Ibrāhīm realized that that which sets, which can be obliterated by the light of day, could not possibly be God. The following evening he again looked into the sky and noticed the moon, which was brighter than the any of the stars. This brighter body, he figured, must be God. But, in the morning it too set and Ibrāhīm once again realized his error and recanted. The sun then rose in all its brightness and hid (غَابَ) the moon and the stars. As he had done twice before, Ibrāhīm set out about worshiping his new-found 'Lord.' When night fell and the sun set, he realized the folly of his deeds and understood finally that only He Who created all these things is God. From that moment on, records Muqātil, Ibrāhīm worshiped only Allah.³⁴

Like Muqātil's account, the narrative of Ishāq ibn Bishr (d. 821 CE) adds a conversation between the curious child Ibrāhīm and his somewhat distressed mother. However, whereas Muqātil inserts Ibrāhīm's mother into a separate scene within the narrative—her conversation with her son precedes his solitary contemplation of the heavens—Ishāq ibn Bishr retains her presence throughout the entire episode.³⁵ This contradicts the Qur'ānic narrative, from which she remains conspicuously absent.

Ishāq ibn Bishr's narrative initially repeats the first part of Muqātil's text. Sitting with his mother in the cave one day, he reports, Ibrāhīm began questioning her as to the identity of his creator, then hers, and then his father's. Her answers recall those given in Muqātil's account: Ibrāhīm's creator is his mother; her creator is his father; his creator is the king.³⁶ When her son asked who created the king,

Jupiter (المشتري, *al-Mushtari*). Both play impressive roles in the heavens. Second in distance from the sun, Venus ranks as the most brilliant planet in the solar system. Jupiter, fifth in distance from the sun, stands as the largest planet in the solar system. See Noah Webster, ed., *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd ed., (Dorset and Baber, 1983), s.v. "Jupiter" and "Venus."

³⁴ 1:571–2. Al-Kisā'ī hints to Ibrāhīm's astral search at an even earlier stage: before Ibrāhīm is born. Al-Kisā'ī describes one of Namrūd's dreams, in which Namrūd dreamed of his downfall by an unborn child. The vision consisted of a man standing with the sun in his right hand, the moon in his left, and all the stars in between. He looked at Namrūd and commanded him to worship the Lord of Heaven and Earth. See al-Kisā'ī (11th cent. CE), 126–127. The image calls to mind not only Ibrāhīm's astral search but also Joseph's dream in Genesis 37:9.

³⁵ Ishāq ibn Bishr, 164b.

³⁶ Muqātil uses the word رَبْ (rabb), lord, master. Ishāq ibn Bishr employs the verb خَلَقَ (khalaqa), to create (as in, "Who created you?").

Ibrāhīm's mother disapprovingly hushed him. Ishāq ibn Bishr's Ibrāhīm did not give up, however. He turned instead to a rational argument based on physical comeliness and again approached his mother. O Mother, he asked, who is more beautiful, me or my father? Answered his mother, Why, you are. Ibrāhīm continued: And who is more beautiful, my father or the king? Replied his mother: Your father is. Well, reasoned Ibrāhīm, if the king could in fact create something, why would he create something more beautiful than himself?³⁷ His mother quieted him, hid him, and then told her husband what had transpired. The conversations between mother and son, however, continued. When night fell upon Ibrāhīm at the end of the lunar month, it was so dark that no stars except for Venus, the brightest, could be seen in the sky. He turned to his mother and said: O Mother! Is this my Lord? She quieted him. Now, Ibrāhīm said this just to unsettle his mother, Ishāq ibn Bishr informs his readers, removing the suspicion of the sin of idolatry from the patriarch. When the bright star disappeared in the morning, Ibrāhīm said: Verily, I do not like that which sets and, moreover, it seems to me that these should have a master. When night fell, the moon rose, shining in the sky. Again, Ibrāhīm turned to his mother and said: O Mother, the light of this one is brighter and more luminous; it is my Lord. He observed the moon without pause until it set. When it did, he said: If my Lord had not guided me, I would have been one of those who went astray. When the sun rose,³⁸ Ibrāhīm said mockingly: This is my Lord for this is the biggest. When it too set, he reiterated his commitment to the One God and said: I am innocent of what people associate with Allah.

Other sources similarly preface Ibrāhīm's contemplation of the heavens with a conversation with his parents, but these revolve around creations of a different nature: the animals.³⁹ According to these

³⁷ Al-Kisā'ī also mentions Ibrāhīm's argument with his mother concerning Namrūd's relative ugliness. He does not associate it, however, with Ibrāhīm's astrological meditations. According to al-Kisā'ī's narrative, when Tārakh hears of his son's aesthetically based blasphemy, he reports his son to the king who immediately has Ibrāhīm arrested, thereby leaving no time for star-gazing (pp. 130–131).

³⁸ Ishāq ibn Bishr, like the other authors, skips over the rising of the sun on the first morning (after the star) and addresses its appearance only after the moon sets on the second day, thus keeping with the Qur'ān's order of stars-moon-sun.

³⁹ Al-Tabarī, *Tā'rikh*, 1:236–7 (1/257–258); Ismā'īl ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Suddī (d. 745 CE), *Tafsīr al-Suddī al-kabīr*, (al-Mansura: Dār al-wafā', 1993), 244–5; al-Suyū'ī

accounts, Ibrāhīm grew up without seeing any living thing other than his parents and himself, for he had been hidden from birth. Eventually his father informed some of his friends that he had a son whom he had hidden and he secured their permission to bring Ibrāhīm out of hiding. When the boy exited the cavern in which he had been living, he saw the beasts and the cattle for the first time and asked his father what these strange beings were. His father named them for him, saying: This is a camel, a cow, a horse, a sheep. Ibrāhīm responded, “These creatures must have a master.” Now, the texts explain, when Ibrāhīm exited the cave, it was after sundown. He looked up and saw a star shining in the sky and said, “This is my Lord!” When it set, he declared, “I do not like a Lord who disappears.” At the end of the night, he saw the moon, which he tried to worship, and then when it too set, the sun.⁴⁰ When the sun disappeared at nightfall, Allah commanded Ibrāhīm, “اَسْلِمْ! (Aslim!)” (“Surrender yourself!”). Ibrāhīm replied, “I have already surrendered myself.” Then he went to preach his faith among his pagan people.

Some accounts differ from the Qur’ān’s version not only by adding elements, such as location and parental conversations, but by changing the very order of the events. The Qur’ān relates that Allah revealed the Kingdom of Heavens and Earth مملکوت السموات ولارض (malakūt al-samāwāt wa-l-ard) to Ibrāhīm and then follows this with the account of Ibrāhīm’s astral contemplation of his Lord (6:76–80). Some exegetes, however, reverse the order of occurrence. According to Ishāq ibn Bishr, “Everything that happened when the night fell after he saw the stars, happened *before* Allah showed him the Kingdom of Heavens and Earth.”⁴¹ Qur’ānic chronology notwithstanding, Ishāq ibn Bishr proclaims that the detailed account of Ibrāhīm’s celestial wonderings and utterances occurred *prior to* Allah’s revelation of the divine realm. Al-Suddī (d. 745 CE) implies the very same thing in his exegesis. In his commentary on the first half of

(1445–1515 CE) *al-Durr al-manthūr*, 3:24. Al-Tha’labī relates one continuous episode in which Ibrāhīm encounters the animals only after striking up identical conversations with his mother (“Who is your Master?”) and then with his father (“Who is your Master?”). See al-Tha’labī, *Qisāṣ al-anbiyā'*, 88–89.

⁴⁰ Ibn ‘Abbās explained that Ibrāhīm exited the cave at the end of the lunar month and for that reason did not see the moon, the larger object, before he saw the stars, as one would have expected. See al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:237 (1/258).

⁴¹ Ishāq ibn Bishr, 164a–b. (Italics mine)

6:74—“Recall when Ibrāhīm said to his father, Azar: Do you take idols as gods”—al-Suddī begins to relate the biography of Ibrāhīm, starting with the nativity prophecy. He continues with Ibrāhīm’s astral search for his Lord, including quotes from the Qur’ān’s astral narrative (6:77–78). Only after completing this account does al-Suddī move back to the explication of v. 75, “Thus did We show Ibrāhīm the Kingdom of the Heavens and the Earth,” which he identifies with Paradise and Hades. He then proceeds directly from v. 75 to v. 82, omitting the discovery verses which he had already incorporated into the account.⁴² Al-Suddī’s placing the search narrative before the revelation of the heavenly realm leads the reader to understand that according to al-Suddī the revelation of the heavens occurred only *after* Ibrāhīm struggled to find his Creator, in contrast to the Qur’ān’s order of events.

In somewhat differing versions of this expanded narrative, al-Qummī and al-Majlisī similarly reverse the order.⁴³ They relate that once, when Ibrāhīm’s mother came to visit him in his cave, he requested that she release him from his hiding place. If I do, she replied, Namrūd will kill you. After she left, he went outside anyway. The sun had sent by then and Venus had risen. Ibrāhīm began to worship first Venus, then when Venus set, the moon, and ultimately, when the moon set, he worshiped the sun. After the sun disappeared, Allah removed the covering of the sky, showed Ibrāhīm the Heavenly Throne (*العرش*, *al-‘arsh*), and revealed to him the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth and all that was in it.⁴⁴ It seems that all these authors understood v. 75, the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth verse, as providing the context for the episode, rather than as introducing the first in a sequence of events in Ibrāhīm’s life.

⁴² Al-Suddī, 245–246.

⁴³ Al-Qummī (d. 940 CE), 1:207. See also al-Majlisī, 12:30.

⁴⁴ Al-Majlisī, *ibid.*, adds that due to Ibrāhīm’s miraculous nature, a day for Ibrāhīm passed as if it were a month; so, it was not too long before he reached thirteen years of age. It was then that his mother came to visit, as was her custom, and her son grabbed hold of her. Clinging to her, he cried: Take me out of here! Al-Majlisī does not record her response nor does he mention her as present during Ibrāhīm’s temporary worship of the spheres, which follows this episode. Al-Majlisī also relates a shorter account (12:41–42) in which Ibrāhīm vaguely “busied himself with working out the commands of Allah” while waiting for his mother to secure his father’s approval to exit the cave.

Despite the variations of the scenarios that accompany Ibrāhīm's look into the heavens, both the fact of Ibrāhīm's celestial contemplation and the manner in which it occurs remain constant throughout the post-Qur'ānic texts. While some sources add a geographic location, others a biographical backdrop, and yet others reorder the surrounding course of events, each variation, like the midrashic texts, constitutes an attempt to provide an answer for the same exegetical question. Namely, how did Ibrāhīm, alone among his people, come to ponder the idea of Allah's existence and why did he turn to the skies for his answer? While some exegetes connect his upward gaze to his recent release from his underground lair, others tie it to a more extensive series of philosophical conversations with his parents. Yet other differences in the post-Qur'ānic texts link Ibrāhīm's search for his Lord with his Lord's revelation of the Heavenly Kingdom to him. Through it all, however, the format of the Islamic discovery motif remains the same: sometime after he was released from his isolated hideaway, the young Ibrāhīm began to contemplate the nature of his universe and of God. Faced with the magnificence of the heavenly bodies for the first time, Ibrāhīm worshiped first a star, then the moon and finally the sun in his search for his Lord. Ultimately, he came to understand that Allah resides in none of these but is external to the material world. Armed with this conviction, Ibrāhīm shunned the idolatry of his people and turned to the worship of Allah alone.

III. *The Post-Qur'ānic Jewish Sources*

Although Abraham's discovery through astral observation fell largely out of favor among the sources of the early rabbinic period that survived to our era (aside from Yose ben Yose), the midrashic narratives of the post-Qur'ānic era embraced the theme anew. In so doing, these later Jewish texts demonstrate greater affinity with their Islamic predecessors, champions of the astral story-line, than with their silent Jewish forbears. As in the Islamic narratives, the post-Qur'ānic Jewish sources tell of an Abraham recently freed from his hidden natal home who, searching for the truth of the universe and of God, looks heavenward. Taking the different stars and planets for God, he, like Ibrāhīm, worships each until convinced of the futility of his actions.

Ultimately, he comes to understand the true nature of God and His universe and turns to the worship of Him alone.

In those days, begins the 11th–12th century Andalusian *Sefer ha-Yashar*⁴⁵ in one of the more Islamically reminiscent narrative expansions, after King Nimrod and his minions forgot all about Abraham and about wanting to destroy him, Abraham, his mother, and his wet-nurse exited the cave in which they had been hiding and returned to society. While the women returned home, Abraham traveled to the house of Noah and his son Shem in order to live with them and study the ways of the Lord from them.⁴⁶ Now Abraham, *Yashar* relates, had known God since he was three years old, before he moved into Noah's house. This happened when, like *Ibrāhīm*, Abraham first glimpsed the sun and, noting its powerful light which illuminated the entire earth, believed it to be God and worshiped it. At dusk, the sun set and Abraham recanted his earlier statement. At nightfall, still searching for the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, Abraham looked skyward and now noticed that the moon and the stars had risen. Aha, thought he, this (the moon) must be the Creator and the stars must be His servants. Abraham worshiped them throughout the night until morning, when the moon disappeared and the sun rose once again. At that moment he realized that all of these were merely servants of the true God, Who resided in none. Abraham then decided to live with Noah and Shem where he could worship the Lord and continue to study His ways.

⁴⁵ *Sefer ha-Yashar*, 27.

⁴⁶ The portrayal of Noah as a loyalist to God and as one whose life spanned a number of generations dates back to the 4th century CE and possibly earlier. *Genesis Rabbah* 26:1 teaches that Psalms 1:1, “Happy is the man who has not followed the counsel of the wicked, or taken the path of sinners,” refers to Noah, who did neither, despite the proliferation of evil both in his generation and in the generations to follow. *Genesis Rabbah* 25:2 explains that Noah's name, Hebrew from the root “to rest,” serves as the basis for this idea; Noah was the respite from idolatry in an era in which such behavior was the norm. The rabbinic portrayal of Shem, Noah's son, as exceptionally virtuous derives from the appearance of his name before that of his elder brother Japhet in Gen. 6:10 and elsewhere. The genealogical record of Noah's sons in Gen. 10:2–31 lists Japhet first, presumably as the eldest, then Ham, then Shem. Shem's name precedes Japhet's in other places throughout Scripture, reasoned the rabbis in *Genesis Rabbah* 26:3, because although both sons were upright men, Shem was greater in righteousness. Both Shem and Japhet demonstrated their moral integrity when they respectfully covered their father's drunken nakedness (which their younger brother Ham had merely mocked) in Gen. 9:23. Although they acted together, Shem's name appears first, suggesting that the righteous behavior was initiated by him, not the older Japhet.

The 12th century Italian-Spanish *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, mixing midrashic and Islamic motifs, likewise re-institutes the astral theme.⁴⁷ As in the early midrashic texts, here Abraham's encounter with the heavenly bodies constitutes but one of a number of episodes in his search for the true God. And, like the Islamic sources, *Jerahmeel* includes a conversation between the patriarch and his parents regarding the identity of the Deity. According to *Jerahmeel*, when Abraham exited his childhood cave, he noticed the sun immediately.⁴⁸ Taking it for God, he began to worship it. He realized his error at night-fall when the sun set and the moon rose in its place. Understanding the conquering moon for God, he set about worshiping it throughout the night. When the sun rose once again on the morrow and obliterated the moon, Abraham understood his error. Perplexed, he turned to his father for help and asked him who God was. Why, this great image here, Teraḥ replied, pointing to one of his idols. If so, said Abraham, let me worship it. He asked his father to prepare a sacrifice of fine flour which he then served to his "god." But the idol did not touch it. Thinking the sacrifice inadequate, Abraham requested from his mother that she prepare a better gift. Again, the sacrifice stood untouched before the unmoving idol. Undeterred, Abraham asked his mother to prepare an even finer sacrifice and tried again. However, even in the face of the youth's sincerest entreaties for acceptance, the "god" stirred not. The young skeptic became very angry and, comprehending the truth of God's nature, declared:

They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see; they have ears but cannot hear, noses but cannot smell; they have hands but cannot touch, feet but cannot walk; they can make no sound in their throats. Those who fashion them, all who trust in them, shall become like them.⁴⁹

He then kindled a fire, burned the idols to ashes and turned to worship the true God.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, 34:8.

⁴⁸ While the midrashic accounts switch the elements' order of appearance around, the Islamic sources consistently begin with the star. I will treat this matter below.

⁴⁹ Psalms 115:5–8.

⁵⁰ In his prolegomenon to Gaster's translation of *Jerahmeel*, Haim Schwarzbaum notes that chapter 34, in which this account appears, recalls the accounts of al-Tha'labī and al-Kisā'ī (p. 45).

The 13th century Yemenite *Midrash ha-Gadol* presents a somewhat parallel version.⁵¹ However, for reasons that remain unclear, whereas *Jerahmeel* lists the order of the planets' emergence as sun-moon-sun and records three attempted food offerings, *Midrash ha-Gadol* describes the astral appearance as moon-sun-moon and lists only one attempted sacrificial gift. After Abraham emerged from the cave, the narrative relates, his heart wandered among all the heavenly lights in an attempt to figure out which was the Divine and which he should worship. He saw the moon along with its star entourage shining at night and took it for God and His entourage. In the morning, the sun eclipsed the moon and so Abraham worshiped the sun in its place. But at night, as he watched, the sun was eclipsed by the return of the moon and the stars. At that, Abraham understood that none of these were gods. A few days later, says the narrator, Terah's turn to worship and serve the idols of the evil Nimrod came around. Abraham accompanied his father, setting the offering of food and wine before the idols and telling them to partake. When nothing happened, when not one idol moved a muscle, Abraham understood the falsity of worshiping them. He set fire to the idols and exited the temple, leaving the door ajar. Despising false gods and abhorring idols, he turned to his true Creator, saying "O Lord of hosts, happy is the man who trusts in You."⁵²

Abraham's celestial search appears in the medieval *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu* (MAA) as well.⁵³ Not surprisingly, this Hebrew translation of what is probably a Judeo-Arabic translation of an Arabic Islamic narrative echoes the earlier Islamic versions with uncommon accuracy.⁵⁴ Although MAA departs slightly from the Islamic accounts in the order of the astral spheres' appearance, like Ibrāhīm, here Abraham considers the stars and the moon separately and not as one unit. Moreover,

⁵¹ *Midrash ha-Gadol*, Gen. 11:28.

⁵² Psalms 84:13. The consistent attribution to Abraham of verses from Psalms, traditionally understood to have been composed by his descendant King David, stems from the rabbinic perception of the unity and chronological fluidity of the Biblical text. It is a common exegetical practice to ascribe verses from the Writings to characters from the Pentateuch. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 261–266, refers to this as "back-referencing."

⁵³ *Bet ha-Midrash*, 1:26.

⁵⁴ Though scholarly consensus points to the text's likely Islamic origin, it was nonetheless popular among Jewish lay-people. As such, it proves worthy of consideration here.

like Ibrāhīm, here Abraham does not become involved in his family's practice of idol-worship. His astrological experience provides him with all the convincing he needs. When the patriarch was 10 days old, relates the author, he exited the cave and started strolling along the banks of a nearby river. When the sun set for the day and the stars came out, Abraham announced, 'These are the Lord!' But when morning broke, he recanted, declaring, 'I will not worship these, for they are not the Lord.' Later when he saw the sun he said, 'This is my Lord and I will praise Him.'⁵⁵ But when the sun set, he realized his error, saying, 'This is not a deity.' He then saw the moon and, looking at it, he declared, 'This is my Lord and I will worship Him.' But when the moon dimmed and the night darkened, he recanted once more and turned to God the Creator instead.

The 8th century CE *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*⁵⁶ (*PRE*) constitutes the earliest post-Qur'ānic source to refer to the astral discovery motif. Unlike our previous three sources, *PRE* alludes to the episode only indirectly. Furthermore, the text does not relate the account in its entirety, or with all the particulars. Nonetheless, it refers to our motif with a few well-chosen words which bear investigating. According to *PRE*, of the ten divinely set trials Abraham underwent over the course of his lifetime, the first occurred at birth. When our forefather Abraham was born, all the noblemen of the realm desired to kill him, relates the narrator without further or previous explanation.⁵⁷ Because of this, Abraham was hidden underground for 13 years. During this time, he saw neither sun nor moon. After 13 years, Abraham emerged from under the earth, speaking the Holy Tongue,

⁵⁵ זֶה אֵלֵי וְאַמְּנַה (zeh eli ve-amzeyhu), Ex. 15:2. Interestingly, the rest of the verse reads, אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי וְאַרְמָמֶנְהוּ (elohei avi va-aromemenu), "the God of my father and I will exalt Him." It is an odd choice of verse for this midrash since the point of the account hinges on the fact that Abraham's god is *not* the god of his father.

⁵⁶ *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1973), chapter 26.

⁵⁷ The narrator's omission of the cause of Abraham's death sentence may indicate a variety of factors. The audience may have been so familiar with the story that repetition was unnecessary. Or, the author may have objected to the cause but wanted to employ the rest of the story-line for his own (homiletical) purposes, e.g. the righteous are persecuted in every generation. Alternatively, perhaps the author deemed the reason unimportant because it was a divine trial and, therefore, a reason is unnecessary and unknowable. At any rate, Abraham's reactions to the persecution and divine test rank as far more important to our author than the motives behind the hostility of his enemies.

despising *asherim*⁵⁸ and abhorring idols and false worship. He trusted only in his Creator, saying, “O Lord of hosts, happy is the man who trusts in You.”⁵⁹

Based on this terse account, one might maintain that the *PRE* account bears little or no connection to our discovery motif. Abraham does not search for his Creator, he does not look into the heavens and, most obviously, from the very beginning he worships nothing save God Himself. Closer analysis of the passage, however, reveals hints that indicate otherwise. Indeed, like *Yashar*, *Jerahmeel*, *Midrash ha-Gadol* and *Ma‘aseh Avraham Avinu*, *PRE* associates the appearance of the sun and the moon with Abraham’s imprisonment and subsequent monotheistic devotion. In the midst of relating Abraham’s success in his first trial, *PRE* includes the somewhat awkward and thus very telling statement: “During this time [underground], he [Abraham] saw neither sun nor moon.” This declaration exhibits a combination of Kugel’s “midrashic overkill” and “narrative resumption,” which together betray the one-time existence of our motif. “Midrashic overkill,” as Kugel explains, comes about when the author of a particular text is aware of two different versions or explanations of a story or phenomenon and, unable or unwilling to decide between them, incorporates both in his own retelling. In so doing, he frequently ends up “overkilling” something in the story.⁶⁰ This mode of operation rings true of our author. Aware of the pre-Islamic midrashic understanding of an Abraham who did *not* search the heavens for God, *PRE* obediently relates that Abraham was hidden underground and emerged worshiping the Lord nonetheless. However, the terse phrase, “During that time, he saw neither sun nor moon” betrays an awareness of an alternate view of the events. This perspective, appearing in the Islamic sources, maintains that Abraham’s first glimpse of the celestial spheres, which he had never before seen, led him to consider their divinity. The inclusion of this short phrase, whose incorporation adds nothing to the flow of the surrounding narrative, serves to catapult the knowledgeable and sensitive reader

⁵⁸ In the Bible, *asherim* and *asherot* refer to sacred trees or poles associated with pagan ritual and religion. See, for example, Deut. 16:21; 2 Kings 21:7, 23:4, 23:6; 2 Chron. 17:6, 24:18, 33:19.

⁵⁹ Psalms 84:13.

⁶⁰ Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House*, 38.

to the contemplation motif without presenting it in full detail. It seems that *PRE* was locked in a struggle between wanting to transmit the more detailed and explanatory motif and recognizing its incompatibility with the by then more 'normative' Jewish depiction of Abraham's monotheistic evolution. Unable or unwilling to reconcile the two, *PRE* pastes them together, overkilling the motif.

PRE's use of "narrative resumption" likewise leads the reader to detect the text's underlying reference to the contemplation motif. "Narrative resumption" occurs when a later editor or author enters new material into an earlier text, thereby disturbing the flow of things. In order to compensate for interrupting, the author or editor will repeat ideas or phrases that appeared before the new idea. This assures that the text flows smoothly on to the next subject as if no interruption had taken place.⁶¹ *PRE* begins by informing the reader that Abraham was hidden underground for 13 years, a number that calls to mind Ibn Ishāq's 13 months. The narrative is then interrupted by the mysterious and extraneous statement that, during that time, Abraham saw neither sun nor moon. The narrative then resumes, repeating both the fact that Abraham lived underground and the specific time spent in that condition: when after *13 years* he emerged from his *underground* home, reiterates the narrative, Abraham emerged despising idols and idolatry. The intermediate statement—that Abraham saw neither sun nor moon while underground—adds little to the narrative at hand. Rather, it strikes the reader as a tautology: if Abraham had been hiding underground, he obviously could not have seen that which was above ground. There is no need to refer to this idea three times. The insertion of the extraneous phrase and the repetition surrounding it points to a break in the original text and the insertion of another later motif, admittedly in truncated form: in discovering God, the resumption implies, Abraham turned first to the heavens for answers.

⁶¹ Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 34.

IV. *Direction of Influence*

A. *From Islam to Judaism*

The erratic behavior of the motif Abraham's astrally oriented search for God—appearing, disappearing, and reappearing just like the sun, moon, and stars of which the motif is comprised—did not escape the eye of modern scholars. In his study of the aggadic links between rabbinic literature and the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Kister observed that despite its early first appearance in Jewish apocryphal works, the astrological-discovery motif subsequently fell largely out of use.⁶² After the Apocryphal period (early 6th cent. BCE–70 CE),⁶³ our motif reappeared only in the midrashic accounts of the later medieval period, he notes. The silence of the close to 800 intervening years and the particular timing of the motif's reappearance do not bear much significance in Kister's eyes, however. As he explains, the phenomenon of traditions found in apocryphal texts and reappearing only later is not rare in midrashic exegesis.⁶⁴ Rather, it forms an integral part of the way the midrashic tradition functions. According to Kister, our theme simply acts within the framework of acceptable midrashic behavior.

Kister's claims notwithstanding, it strikes the student of the text as far from coincidental that the celestial contemplation theme reappears in precisely those midrashic sources that follow the rise and proliferation of Islam. This fact becomes especially significant when one notes the warm reception our motif received in the interceding Islamic tradition. As noted in detail above, Muslim exegetes from very early on recounted versions of the celestial contemplation theme when relating the narrative of Ibrāhīm's monotheistic ‘conversion.’ As analysis of the Jewish and Islamic sources together will demonstrate, it seems likely that the appearance of the contemplation/worship motif in the post-Qur’ānic Jewish sources was not due to chance

⁶² Kister, “Observations on Aspects of Exegesis,” 5–7.

⁶³ The period of the Apocrypha coincides roughly with the era of Second Temple, building of which began before the Apocryphal period in c. 520 BCE. The Romans destroyed this Temple in 70 CE, the closing date of that period of Jewish history. See *EJ*, s.v. “Temple,” by Bezalel Narkiss (15:955–960).

⁶⁴ In demonstrating this principle, Kister treats other midrashic elements from Abraham's biography (p. 5), as well as a midrash on the sale of Joseph (pp. 3–4).

or to the internal workings of the midrashic system alone. Rather, the motif's re-emergence owes much to the mediation of the Islamic sources of the intervening years.

The correlation between the late post-Qur'ānic Jewish sources and the Muslim texts was not lost upon David Sidersky. Specifically, Sidersky noticed the similarity between the 13th century CE *Sefer ha-Yashar* and an account mined from the work of the 10th century CE al-Tabarī. However, other than pointing out that similarities exist, Sidersky provides little information or insight on the matter; he does not state precisely what the resemblances were, nor does he investigate the significance of an Islamic imprint on later Jewish texts, much as Kister attributed little significance to the timing of the motif's reappearance. Rather, Sidersky attempts to persuade the reader of precisely the opposite and in so doing goes further afield than Kister. He quickly points out that despite *Yashar*'s resemblance to al-Tabarī, the motif of Abraham's celestial contemplations actually derives from the much earlier pre-Islamic Josephus narrative. "Toutefois, il n'y a aucun doute que cette légende est très ancienne," he insists.⁶⁵

Sidersky's attempt to trace this motif back to an originally Jewish source proves problematic, for a methodological question immediately arises. Given that the second century BCE *Jubilees* (12:16–20) presents a depiction of the events analogous to Josephus' and also predates him by close to three hundred years, why does Sidersky claim Josephus, the later of the two, as the 'source' for the discovery motif? After all, one can easily trace the narrative back an additional 300 years! Additionally, while Josephus does refer to Abraham's discovery of God through celestial contemplations, the format of his account, as well as that of *Jubilees*, has very little in common with both the later Islamic and Jewish accounts. Josephus records that Abraham came to the understanding of God after noting the irregular behavior of the astral gods. He does not specify precisely what Abraham observed, as these later texts do, nor does he entertain the idea that the patriarch worshiped the spheres, even if only temporarily. Rather, Abraham looked into the sky, noticed the irregular, and hence uncontrolled, movements of its inhabitants and realized immediately the falsity of what his people worshiped. The more

⁶⁵ Sidersky, *Les Origines*, 35–36.

detailed and specific account of the later Muslim texts hardly seems a direct descendant of Josephus' or even *Jubilees*'.

Indeed, a number of details which appear in both the post-Qur'ānic midrashim and the Islamic texts but not in the pre-Islamic Jewish narratives support the contention that the motif's later Jewish usage hearkens back to an Islamic, rather than Jewish, extraction. Perhaps the most striking of these concerns the patriarch's devotional reaction to the celestial spheres on first encountering them. According to the Qur'ān as well as the later Islamic narratives, Ibrāhīm's first glimpse of Jupiter/Venus, the moon, and the sun results in his mistaking them each for God and in his venerating them each in turn. The pre-Islamic Abraham, however, engages in no such behavior. In *Jubilees*, Josephus, and Yose ben Yose, Abraham contemplates the nature of the astral spheres but does not once mistake them for his Lord nor does he move to worship them. Instead, he merely examines their behavior as they rise and set and from these observations arrives at the realization of the falsehood of serving them. Similarly, no astral worship occurs in the narratives of either the *Apocalypse of Abraham* or *Genesis Rabbah*. In both, Abraham simply refers to the heavenly bodies as part of his polemic against paganism; he himself has already attained gnosis through some unnamed process.⁶⁶ The post-Qur'ānic Abraham, however, deviates quite clearly from his early midrashic prototype, following the Ibrāhīmic model of behavior instead. Namely, in *Sefer ha-Yashar*, the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, *Midrash ha-Gadol*, and *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu*, Abraham looks to heaven in search of his Creator and, mistaking the sun, moon and/or stars for his Lord, he *worships* them just as Ibrāhīm does. Furthermore, like Ibrāhīm, this later Abraham recants only when his 'god' is eclipsed by the rise of a new one. Following in the footsteps of his Islamic counterpart, Abraham disassociates himself from astrology only after having erroneously worshiped all three celestial spheres.

In addition to the patriarch's astrological worship, the matter of one element eclipsing or conquering another remains absent from

⁶⁶ Ginzberg (V: 210, no. 16) attributes the motif of Ibrāhīm's astrally based discovery to *Genesis Rabbah*'s (38:13) polemical discussion between Abraham and Nimrod in which Abraham refutes astrological worship by pointing out the hierarchical strength of the different elements. Despite Ginzberg's assertions, Abraham's argument in *Genesis Rabbah* does not actually include the astrological spheres (though the *Apocalypse of Abraham* does). See above, pp. 93–94. It seems unlikely to me that it is, therefore, the source of the Islamic narrative.

the pre-Islamic midrashim although, as noted above, it appears in both the Islamic and the post-Qur'ānic Jewish narratives. *Jubilees*, Josephus and Yose ben Yose—the three narratives which mention astral bodies in the Abraham context at all—describe only a general viewing of the heavenly spheres. They do not describe the serial observation in which one planet transcends another. Rather, the pre-Islamic midrashim state vaguely that Abraham looked into the heavens and noted the actions of the elements contained therein.⁶⁷ The Islamic narratives reject this general description and report instead a scenario in which Ibrāhīm observes only one element at a time, watching each as it rises and is then eclipsed by the next. The post-Qur'ānic midrashim adopt this rendering over the earlier midrashic one.

The patriarch's physical location at the time of his celestial scrutiny and its significance in explaining why his search focused heavenward likewise points to Islamic underpinnings of the post-Qur'ānic midrashic accounts. The majority of the Islamic narratives maintain that Ibrāhīm's investigation of the heavens occurred immediately upon his emergence from the cave in which he had been born. For reasons that remain unexplained, Ibrāhīm's reentry into the world at large took place at night, after the sun had set and the moon and stars had risen. Not having ever seen the sky or its inhabitants, the recently released child initially mistook their beauty and illuminative power for marks of divinity. The post-Qur'ānic midrashim adopt this Islamic depiction and, following suit, locate the event at the mouth of Abraham's natal cave. Indeed, *Jerahmeel*, *Midrash ha-Gadol*, and *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu* state this location outright. *Sefer ha-Yashar* (p. 27) reports that Abraham hid in his cave with his mother and his wet-nurse until the king forgot about wanting to destroy him. The women returned home and Abraham traveled to the house of Noah in order to study. But before he moved to Noah's house, the text explains, he looked into the heavens and glimpsed the sun, etc. Since the text informs us that Abraham moved to Noah's immediately upon emerging from the cave, his star-gazing must have occurred on the heels of his exit, at or near the cave's entrance. *PRE*'s truncated narrative refers to this location more indirectly: Abraham hid underground

⁶⁷ In the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, darkness—and not another planet, as in the Islamic sources—vanquishes the sun.

for 13 years, *PRE* relates, and adopted an anti-pagan stance immediately upon emerging. The implication here suggests that whatever experience he underwent that convinced him of the futility of the religion of his people occurred at the mouth of the tunnel. Moreover, *PRE*'s count of 13 years echoes more Ibn Ishāq's count of 13 months than *BT Sotah*'s 10 years.

In contrast, the pre-Islamic Jewish narratives present a number of different locations for Abraham's monotheistic discovery, none of which includes a cave. As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, the very idea of the patriarch's hidden birth and cave childhood remains foreign to the early midrashic sources. The closest the sources come to such a designation appears in *Jubilees* (11:16) which records that Abraham separated himself from his father in order to worship his Creator at two weeks of age but makes no mention of a cave or a cave-birth. In fact, *Jubilees* (12:16–20) furthermore reports that the celestial investigation occurred when the 60 year-old Abraham, having moved his family from Chaldea to Canaan, was sitting outside one night watching the skies. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* (7:1–12) places Abraham's discovery of his Lord and his polemical use of celestial imagery during a dinner conversation between Abraham and his father. Here too, no reference to a cave appears. Josephus, *Genesis Rabbah*, and Yose ben Yose similarly provide neither geographic nor chronological context whatsoever for the incident.

B. From Judaism to Islam

All this is not to say that the early Jewish sources had no bearing upon both the later Jewish and Islamic versions of the forefather's discovery of his Creator. Although the specific details and the narrative format of the early midrashic and Islamic narratives diverge, the basic underlying idea most certainly finds its source in the Jewish milieu. Indeed, in the face of the midrashic evidence—*Jubilees*, Josephus, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Genesis Rabbah*, Yose ben Yose—already presented, one cannot dispute the fact that the very idea of the forefather's break with his idolatrous heritage dates back to the pre-Islamic era of midrash.

The initial supposition that Abraham's family worshiped something other than God, a practice Abraham rejected, appears in the Bible itself, in Joshua 24:2–3. After assembling the tribes of Israel at Shechem, Joshua delivered a speech to the Israelites in which he

quickly recounted to them their history as a people connected to their God:

Thus said the Lord, God of Israel: “In olden times, your forefathers—Terah the father of Abraham and father of Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan and multiplied his offspring . . .”

Here Abraham’s father’s idol worship is clearly stated. Abraham’s rejection of the family’s religious practices is more subtly transmitted. The verse’s dissociation of Abraham from his father—“your forefathers” includes Terah but not Abraham, as we would expect—implies a distinction between their actions as well; while one worshiped other gods, the other separated himself from such behavior. Consequently, Abraham earned God’s attention and blessing.

Furthermore, the idea that Abraham grew up among *astrologers* specifically, whom he later rejects, likewise finds support in the Bible. According to Genesis 11:31, Abraham hailed from *Ur Kasdim*, Ur of the Chaldees. Though Genesis does not elaborate on the religious practices of the Chaldeans, the Bible provides such information in a later place. In the book of Daniel (2:2), *Kasdim* (Chaldeans) appears as a type of technical term for astrologers. Awakening from a nightmare, the king “commanded to call the magicians, and the enchanters, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans, to tell the king his dreams.”⁶⁸ By grouping the Chaldeans together with other soothsaying types, the text implies a similarity between them. Moreover, Daniel later responds to the king, saying (2:27), “The secret which the king hath asked can neither wise men, enchanters, magicians, nor astrologers declare unto the king.” In his response, Daniel glibly replaces the proper name “Chaldeans” with the (apparently) synonymous term “astrologers.”⁶⁹

The early midrashic-era texts supported and elaborated upon this Chaldean-astrologer identification. According to Philo and Pseudo-Philo (1st century CE), the Chaldeans among whom Abraham grew up were “especially active in the elaboration of astrology and ascribed

⁶⁸ “וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לִקְרָא לְחֶרְטָמִים וּלְאַשְׁפָּים וּלְמַחְשָׁפִים וּלְכָשָׁדִים לְהִנֵּיד לְמֶלֶךְ הַלְמֹתָאָה” (vay-yomer ha-melekh li-qero la-hartumim ve-la-ashafim ve-la-mekhashefim ve-la-casdi'im le-haggid la-melekh halomatav).

⁶⁹ “גָּזְרִים” (gazrin).

everything to the stars.”⁷⁰ So too *Jubilees* relates that Serug taught his son Nahor, Abraham’s grandfather, the “researches of the Chaldeans” in order for him to practice heavenly divinations and astrology.⁷¹ *Midrash Tanhuma* (5th century CE) interprets God’s command to Abraham to “go forth from his father’s house” in Gen. 12:1 as teaching that Terah’s people were astrologers and idolaters. We find, says *Tanhuma*, that paganism is called a ‘father’ to its adherents, of whom Jer. 2:27 says, “Who say to a tree, ‘You are my father,’ and to a stone, ‘You brought me forth.’”⁷²

Abraham’s conscious detachment from the pagan religion of his surroundings finds its source in an additional Scriptural verse. Plagued by the Bible’s silence regarding Abraham’s biography, the rabbis were on the lookout for any hints that might help them to understand how ‘Abraham, Son of Terah’ earned the role of ‘Abraham, Father of Israel.’ The surprising Biblical use of an uncommon and awkwardly translated term, **בְּקֻעַּת** (*ekev*), provided them with one snippet of information. In Gen. 26:5, God informs Abraham’s son Isaac that He will bless him and his seed “**עַקְבָּת אֲשֶׁר** (*ekev asher*, because that) Abraham hearkened to My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, My laws.” The rabbis noted that the numerical worth of **בְּקֻעַּת**, a word not commonly used in such a grammatical construction, equals 172. Abraham, the Bible records in Gen 25:7–8, died at age 175. Thus they reasoned that the additional word in 26:5 implies that Abraham followed God for 172 years of his 175 years, recognizing his Creator at the age of 3.⁷³ Until that

⁷⁰ Philo, *De Abrahamo*, 15:39–41; On Pseudo-Philo, see M. R. James, trans., *The Biblical Antiquities of Philo* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1917), 85–86.

⁷¹ *Jubilees*, 11:7–8. Reflecting *Jubilees*, *Midrash ha-Gadol* on Gen. 11:28 records that Nimrod’s magicians accused Haran, Abraham’s brother, of being an astrologer. *Jerahmeel* later tries to absolve the appearance of impropriety from Abraham’s ancestors by insisting that though the Chaldeans practiced astrology, divination, and planetary prognostication, Serug and his son “did not walk in their ways” (27:7).

⁷² *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber edition), Gen. 12:1. Although some of the ancient rabbis understood there to be a connection between the planetary movements and the events on earth, they found that in practice astrology was compromised by its pagan practices and by human misunderstanding. Hence, they often associated astrology with idolatry, as in this text.

⁷³ *BT Nedarim* 32b; *Genesis Rabbah* 64:4; *Midrash Tanhuma*, Gen. 12:1 *Pesiqta Rabbati* (6th–7th century CE), ed. Meir Ish-Shalom (Vienna: Joseph Kaiser, 1880), 21, 105a; Zvi Meir Rabinovitz, ed. *Mahazor piyute R. Yanai la-Torah vela-mo’adim* [The Liturgical Poems of R. Yannai] (6th–7th century CE) (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1985), 1:125, l. 43–44.

point, his third birthday, he worshiped no differently from the rest of the pagans amongst whom he lived. The son of Teraḥ became the father of Israel at the age of three when he broke from Teraḥ to serve the True God.

The early Jewish texts, as noted in detail above, associate the patriarch's gnostic achievement with his reflections on the erroneousness of specifically astrological worship. But in light of the Bible's silence in the matter, on what does this early midrashic correlation between the astrological signs, God, and Abraham base itself? The tripartite coalition finds a jumping off point in Genesis 15:5. Having promised Abraham that He will make him a great nation, God now turns to a visual aid. He takes Abraham outside and instructs him, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them . . . So shall your offspring be." Here God Himself directs Abraham's attention to the residents of heaven and to their symbolic numeric, not divine, value.

This same biblical quote and, more significantly, the midrashic reaction to it appear to account for Ibrāhīm's divinely sanctioned viewing of the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth in the Islamic tradition. The interaction between God and Abraham, encapsulated in the phrase "And He brought him outside (v. 5)" struck the rabbis as somewhat odd. Why does God bring Abraham outside and outside what? After all, the Bible tells us that the entire interaction took place in a vision, not in real time or space: "After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision" (v. 1). R. Judah, speaking in the name of R. Johanan, suggests an answer: "outside" does not denote the opposite of inside, the interior of a structure. Rather, God raised Abraham above the covering of the sky so that he looked down at the heavens and not up at it. In other words, God took Abraham "outside" of the realm of the universe.⁷⁴ The later Islamic exegetes picked up this idea, it seems, when they defined the Kingdom of Heaven that Allah reveals to Ibrāhīm in Q 6:72–73 as consisting of the stars, the sun, and the moon and not a vision of God's throne or paradise. Even the Arabic appellation for the heavenly realm, ملکوت السموات والارض (*malakūt al-samāwāt wa-l-ard*), carries probable Jewish undertones. As Arthur Jeffrey points out, the word

⁷⁴ *Genesis Rabbah*, 44:12.

ملکوت (*malakūt*) is not actually a proper Arabic construction, as shown by the *وت* ending, and, in fact, the term troubled a number of the classical exegesis. In Arabic proper, the word for “kingdom” is ملک (*mulk*). Some scholars, like Geiger, derived ملکوت from the Hebrew מלכּוּת (*malkhut*), a word commonly used in rabbinic texts. Jeffrey maintains that the term derives from the spoken language of the Arabian Jews, the Aramaic מלכּוּת (*malkhuta*).⁷⁵

In addition to the textual motives for portraying Abraham as a man who conducted an astrologically based search for his Lord, scholars have suggested that homiletical inspiration played a large part as well. As Knox noted, the astral search theme displays elements attuned to the polemical needs of the post-biblical age in which the rabbis lived. According to Knox, the representation of Abraham as the father of astrology gained wide currency in the Hellenistic era, specifically in the 1st century CE. An Orphic fragment quoted by the Hellenistic Jewish Aristobulus, the Greek Clement of Alexandria, and Pseudo-Justin relates that God cannot be seen by man.⁷⁶ Indeed, insists the narrative, He has been seen only by an “only-begotten offshoot of the race of the Chaldeans” who was able to come to a vision of Him through his knowledge of the stars. This scion of the Chaldeans remains unnamed in all the texts in which he appears. Despite this, Josephus later identifies him with Abraham.⁷⁷ Additionally, the pre-Philonic Hellenist Artapanus credited Abraham with demonstrating to the Egyptians the futility of their religion and teaching them astronomy and astrology instead.⁷⁸ This midrashic portrayal served an important polemical role for the Judaism of the Dispersion, which, along with Hellenistic philosophy, admitted some truth to astrology. There remained no stronger argument against Hellenism than to say that Abraham founded astrology and astronomy and then abandoned both for Judaism.⁷⁹ Once

⁷⁵ Jeffrey, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 24–25, 270–271.

⁷⁶ Their dates are as follows: Aristobulus, 1st half of the second century BCE; Clement, 150(?)–220 BCE; and Pseudo-Justin, 2nd half of the third century BCE.

⁷⁷ Knox, 56.

⁷⁸ Ginzberg, V: 222, no. 78. This idea reappears in *Jerahmeel*, who credits Abraham with teaching magic to the Zoroastrians (35:4).

⁷⁹ Knox, 56. Further support for the depiction of Abraham as former star-reader turned God-worshiper, the more powerful system, appears in *BT Nedarim* 32a. Here Abram reads in the stars that he is not destined to have children. God lifts him

he disowned the inferior systems, God called him to move from his father's house.

Kister likewise advocates the idea of polemics as the motivating factor behind the astral search. According to Kister, the description of Abraham as an astrologer resulted not from an exegetical bid to explain a textual irregularity, but from an apologetically motivated attempt to 'judaize' the non-Jewish hero of Hellenistic texts. The ancient midrashic legends—Philo, *Jubilees* 12:16–21, *Genesis Rabbah* 44:12, among others—that use the image of Abraham as an astrologer in order to discredit astrology, he maintains, developed after the Abraham-astrologer identification was already firmly implanted in the midrashic tradition.⁸⁰ In judaizing the non-Jewish hero, Judaism is strengthened.

C. *Yose ben Yose and the Circular Life of Texts*

All this leads us to consider the following question: if the early Jewish narratives did indeed present their own vision of Abraham's discovery of God, why do the later Jewish texts follow the Islamic, rather than the Jewish format? Why depict Abraham in his serial worship of the elements when this diverges from the more 'normative' midrashic portrayal in which astrology plays a lesser role and in which idolatry experiences a thrashing as well?⁸¹

A return to the lyric poem of the fifth century CE Yose ben Yose will provide one possible answer to this conundrum and, in so doing, uncover a hint at the reason for the motif's circular travels. *Jubilees* and Josephus, the two pre-Islamic midrashic accounts that incorporate the astral motif into Abraham's search, speak in general terms only of the patriarch's meditations on the spheres; they relate merely that he looked into the heavens and discovered God. Yose ben Yose's poem, however, breaks the incident down into separate and detailed

above the vault of the heavens and commands him not to rely on astrology since Israel is not subject to it. (Moreover, though "Abram" was destined to remain childless, "Abraham" was not.) See also *BT Shabbat* 156a; *Genesis Rabbah* 44:5; *Exodus Rabbah*, 38:6 in *Midrash Rabbah ha-Mevo'ar*, (Jerusalem: Mekhon ha-Midrash ha-Mevo'ar, 5751 [1990/1]), v. 2, *Sefer Shemot*.

⁸⁰ Kister, appendix.

⁸¹ Islamic references to the forefather's experimenting with and rejecting idol worship (as opposed to astrology), such as appear in both the early and later midrashic narratives, are conspicuously absent.

components. Abraham, Yose writes, looked into the heavens in his search for his Master and Creator. He observed first the powerful rising and setting of the sun, then the moon leaping through the windows of the east and west, and finally the mass of stars that rises and sets every day without losing even one in the process. Only after having considered the natures of all three objects did Abraham “become wise.” Proclaiming, “These must have a master!” he turned to serve God.⁸²

Ibrāhīm’s behavior in the later Islamic sources echoes Yose’s depiction. The Arabic narratives, from the Qur’ān on, repeatedly relate Ibrāhīm’s *separate* contemplation/worship of each of the celestial bodies. Over two or three nights, he worships first the star, then the moon, and ultimately the sun.⁸³ Only after observing the behavior of all three distinctly does he, like his midrashic antecedent, ‘become wise’ and like Abraham, turn to God.

Once in the Islamic environment, however, the motif undergoes a number of changes that link it with the Islamic narratives of Ibrāhīm’s birth, a link Yose does not explicitly make but which subsequently appears in the post-Qur’ānic midrashic accounts. The Muslim exegetes place the scene at the mouth of the cave in which Ibrāhīm had been born; Ibrāhīm’s parents, who visit and care for the infant, discuss his religious questions with him; Allah, the grand director of the whole matter of Ibrāhīm’s birth and existence, jumps back in for more, either by revealing the divine realm or by sending an angelic teacher. Interestingly, the Islamic narratives omit the idol worship of Ibrāhīm’s people, preferring pure astrology instead. The late midrashic patriarch follows suit and his experimental worship of his father’s idols, present in the early midrashic accounts, disappears. One finds worship—rather than mere observation—of the spheres, instead.

That this Islamically altered depiction of the forefather’s search for God in turn leaves its impression upon the post-Qur’ānic Jewish

⁸² Yose ben Yose, 141.

⁸³ It should be pointed out that while the pre-Islamic Abraham watches first the sun, then the moon and finally the stars, Ibrāhīm consistently notices Venus/Jupiter (a star) first, followed by the moon and only afterward does he take note of the sun. The significance of this variant seems to be based on a difference in logical organization. Yose begins from the brightest and therefore most likely to be seen—the sun—and continues in descending order in which the weaker overtakes the mightier, thus disproving the power of each in turn. The Islamic sources begin from the smallest (stars) and least powerful objects and ascend to the mightiest over all, Allah.

narratives should surprise few. Having already accepted the Islamic notion of a sibyllic prophecy and of the patriarch's birth, the authors likely noted few problems with the next detailed episode that demonstrates his magnificence, his remarkable persona, and his special place in God's heart. The one added factor apt to cause the most concern, Ibrāhīm's *worship* of the false gods, finds a precursor in the pre-Islamic *Apocalypse of Abraham* (1:2–3) where Abraham initially sacrifices to his father's idols before rejecting such practices as false. Ibrāhīm's heretical slip thus recalls that of Abraham and seemingly caused little concern among the post-Qur'ānic midrashists. Rather, along with the scenario presented by Yose, this subtly altered Islamic motif likely rang familiar, rather than foreign, to post-Qur'ānic midrashic ears.

V. *Significance: Guided v. Independent*

The motif of the forefather's discovery of God carries importance beyond tracking or tracing Jewish and Islamic intertextual activity. Like the motif of Abraham's birth prophecy, the astral discovery motif sheds light on the theological/philosophical differences between the Jewish and Islamic conceptualizations of the character and nature of their shared founding father. Namely, the Islamic accounts describe a man whose life and role are foreordained by God; Ibrāhīm's discovery of his Lord, the foundation upon which his monotheistic faith builds, does not result from independent thought. At points it appears almost as if he had no choice in the matter at all. Instead, as the Islamic narratives themselves phrase it, Ibrāhīm was "rightly guided" to belief by an active deity who revealed Himself in an obvious and irrefutable manner. Conversely, the Jewish formulation of Abraham's discovery of God presents Abraham as an independent intellect. He comes to an understanding of God's nature and existence due to his own intelligence and powers of analysis. God Himself retains but a passive role in the affair.

A. *Islam and the 'Rightly Guided' Forefather*

Allah's active participation in Ibrāhīm's monotheistic journey manifests itself at the outset in the Qur'ān. The text (6:74ff) reveals a complex understanding of precisely how Ibrāhīm attained knowledge

of his Lord; at the same time that the Qur'ān portrays Ibrāhīm as struggling to identify his true Lord on his own, the Qur'ān credits the patriarch's discovery to Allah Himself. This duality comes to the fore in the midst of Ibrāhīm's contemplation of the second of the three objects of his devotion, the moon. Mistaking the moon for a deity, Ibrāhīm worships it as his Lord until it sets. In the morning Ibrāhīm proclaims, "Had my Lord not *guided* me, I would surely have been of those who go astray" (6:77). In so declaring, the Qur'ānic patriarch attributes his understanding of the truth of his erring astrological worship to Allah's guidance. Shortly afterward, the sun appears in the sky. Puzzlingly, for he has already acknowledged Allah, Ibrāhīm once again mistakes an astral body for his Lord and worships the sun until sunset. That evening he once more rejects astrological devotions and turns finally to the exclusive and permanent worship of Allah. Although the Islamic patriarch completes the full cycle of independent search, false worship—perhaps in compliance with the pre-Islamic midrashic format—ultimately the text assures that the reader will understand that Allah directed him in this. Ibrāhīm himself acknowledges as much when he states, "Had my Lord not guided me."⁸⁴

Allah's role as director of Ibrāhīm's monotheistic odyssey appears in the expanded Islamic texts as well. Unlike the somewhat confusing scriptural account, the Muslim exegetes often go to great lengths to assure a clear understanding of Allah's influence on His loyal friend's discovery. Some authors emphasize that Allah's revelation of the Kingdom of the Heavens and Earth, and thus of Himself, occurred *before* Ibrāhīm looked skyward. Others introduce into the proceedings the angel Jibrīl, in the guise of religious teacher. Yet other accounts state in no uncertain terms that Allah guided Ibrāhīm while he was yet a babe in his cave, before his first glimpse of the heavenly lights. Whatever their method, all take pains to ensure their audience's understanding of their patriarch as "rightly guided."

⁸⁴ The depiction of Allah's guiding Ibrāhīm to worship other than Himself may be an attempt to clear Ibrāhīm of sin, in accordance with the Muslim theory of the infallibility of its prophets. The taint of sin would have prevented future prophets from becoming appropriate vessels for word of Allah, who is holy and perfect. If Allah arranged the sinful activity Himself, however, one could maintain that no sin actually took place.

1. *Kingdom of Heavens and Earth*

While the Qur'ān in 6:74–78 indicates that Allah revealed the Kingdom of the Heavens and Earth to Ibrāhīm *before* he began his serial worship of the astral spheres, the wording of the verses allows for an alternate reading. The Qur'ān joins the two episodes together with the seemingly innocuous word, “كَذَلِكَ” (*kadhalika*). Often translated as the equally innocuous English “thus,” the Arabic term also carries the meaning of “like that,” “in like manner,” or “equally.”⁸⁵ None of these alternate meanings requires the reader to understand that one event necessarily followed the other. One could just as easily and justifiably understand that the two occurrences simply resembled each other in some manner or that the revelation of the heavenly kingdom serves as the context in which Ibrāhīm's search took place. The issue of which episode preceded which remains open to a measure of debate, depending on how one interprets “كَذَلِكَ.”

A number of the Qur'ānic exegetes, therefore, added greater detail, and thus emphasis, to this verse in order to prevent any ‘incorrect’ understanding of the chronology of the event. As a newborn child, they relate in their commentaries to v. 75,⁸⁶ Ibrāhīm was hidden from the ‘tyrant of tyrants,’ Namrūd, and placed in a cave. During Ibrāhīm's time in seclusion, Allah provided sustenance for the child and so he grew in safety. When the time came for Ibrāhīm to leave his hiding place, the scholars insist, Allah showed him the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth. The Kingdom of Heaven, they explain, consisted of the sun, the moon, and the stars. The Kingdom of Earth contained the mountains, rivers, seas, trees, and all the great creatures.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book I part 3, p. 948, s.v. “[.]”

⁸⁶ 'Abd al-Razzāq, v. 1, pt. 2:212–213; al-Tabarī, *Ja'mi' al-bayān*, 7:246; Ibn 'Asākir, 172; al-Suyūtī, 3:23, 25. Al-Suyūtī (3:24) maintains that Ibrāhīm also saw the divine throne. Muqātil presents a similar chronology, in which the revelation occurred after Ibrāhīm's conversations with his parents (“Who is your Lord?”) and before he spied Jupiter while standing at the entrance to the cave (p. 570). For a detailed rendition of Muqātil's narrative, see above pp. 100–101.

⁸⁷ One could read the identification of the Kingdom of Heaven with the sun, moon, and stars as indicating that the exegetes understood vs. 76–78 (“When night came down upon him, he saw a star...”) as the definition of the revelation in v. 75 (“Thus did we show Ibrāhīm the Kingdom of the Heavens and Earth”). I remain unconvinced of such a reading. The exegetes detail not only the members of the Kingdom of Heaven but also those that constitute the Kingdom of Earth (mountains, rivers, etc.). However, neither the Qur'ānic nor exegetical Ibrāhīm

In other words, the religious “truth” was revealed to him before Ibrāhīm glimpsed the outside world and its goings-on for himself. Thus, the exegetes portray Ibrāhīm’s discovery of Allah as both subject to His will and dependant on it.

But what of those aforementioned Islamic narratives that switch the order and place the divine revelation *after* the human discovery? Does the early placement of the astral search imply that these authors/compilers—Ishāq ibn Bishr, al-Suddī, al-Qummī, and al-Majlisī⁸⁸—support the midrashic idea that Ibrāhīm discovered Allah *without* His help? Though this might seem to be the case cursorily, these authors utilize other means to assure we understand the discovery episode as divinely directed. Along with the rest of the exegetes who recount the astral episode, Ishāq ibn Bishr, al-Suddī, al-Qummī and al-Majlisī include the Qur’ānic Ibrāhīm’s admission of dependence upon Allah. As in the Qur’ān, after realizing his error in worshiping the moon but before taking note of the sun, this extra-Qur’ānic Ibrāhīm declares, “Had my Lord not guided me, I would surely have been of those who go astray.”⁸⁹ In other words, Ibrāhīm attributes credit for his eventual discovery of Allah to Allah Himself. Moreover, he does so before the discovery has actually been completed. Ishāq ibn Bishr distances himself even more from implying that Allah’s role was less than crucial to the patriarch’s success. Terming Ibrāhīm’s post-sun submission to Allah “Islam,” Ishāq ibn Bishr says not that Ibrāhīm discovered the religion but that it was “revealed” to him. Furthermore, Ishāq ibn Bishr notes that Ibrāhīm’s words during his astral contemplation were on the point of divine inspiration, *وَحْيٌ* (*wahy*).⁹⁰ Ibrāhīm, then, was not solely responsible for the event. Al-Qummī and al-Majlisī similarly deny the suggestion of divine non-guidance. According to both, immediately after the setting of Ibrāhīm’s third experimental god, the sun, Allah revealed the Kingdom of the Heavens and Earth, including His throne and “He who sits upon it.” This revelation occurred before Ibrāhīm managed

conducts a parallel search for his Lord among the elements of the ‘revealed’ Kingdom of Earth. I therefore read the exegetes as speaking of two separate events: a) Allah reveals the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth to Ibrāhīm, and b) Ibrāhīm searches for his Lord among the astral spheres.

⁸⁸ See above, pp. 103–104.

⁸⁹ Ishāq ibn Bishr, 164b; al-Suddī, 246; al-Qummī, 1:207; al-Majlisī, 12:29.

⁹⁰ ”قال ائمّي بري مما تشركون في باح بالاسلام وكاد ان تكلم بالوحى“ Ishāq ibn Bishr, 164b–165a.

to process the implication of the sunset and to reject astrological worship. Instead, the scholars transmit, before Ibrāhīm could think or speak, Allah immediately lifted the coverings of the divine realm and presented Ibrāhīm with incontrovertible evidence of His existence and majesty; He did not leave the matter up to Ibrāhīm to discover on his own.⁹¹

2. *Jibrīl and Ibrāhīm*

Other sources inject the angel Jibrīl into Ibrāhīm's religious development. Though absent from the Qur'ānic text, in these recensions Jibrīl takes on the very important role of divinely dispatched religious counsel and teacher. According to al-Mas'ūdī (896–956 CE),⁹² some scholars dispense entirely with the motif of astral contemplation/worship. Allah, they maintain, had selected Ibrāhīm to be a *nabī* (prophet) and a *khalīl* (beloved friend) and so “guidance was granted to him from beforehand” (”واتي رشده من قبل واصطفاه وكان نبياً خليلاً“). He sent the angel Jibrīl to Ibrāhīm and Jibrīl taught him his religion. With divine aid, Ibrāhīm thus avoided sin and error and worshiping other than Allah Himself. Al-Ya'qūbī (ca. 897 CE) states the same somewhat more succinctly. Allah sent Ibrāhīm as a *nabī*, he instructs, and so He sent him Jibrīl to teach him his religion.⁹³ Following along this line, Muqātil identifies the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth with Jibrīl's religious teachings. On Allah's command, Muqātil reports, Jibrīl raised Ibrāhīm heavenward where he saw the heavenly empire and then, on Allah's command, Jibrīl returned him to the earth.⁹⁴ Al-Kisā'ī likewise points to Jibrīl's role as Ibrāhīm's divinely sent teacher of religion; he tells that after Ibrāhīm spent four years in his underground home, Jibrīl came to him bearing a garment from paradise and the Nectar of Unity (*shurbat al-tawhīd*).⁹⁵ He dressed the patriarch in the garment and instructed him to drink the Nectar, thereby inoculating the youth against the pagan sin of *shirk*.⁹⁶ Duly armed, theologically speaking at least, Ibrāhīm then left the cave on Jibrīl's orders.

⁹¹ Al-Qummī, 1:207; al-Majlisī, 12:18.

⁹² Al-Mas'ūdī, 1:50.

⁹³ Al-Ya'qūbī, 21–22.

⁹⁴ 1:571.

⁹⁵ Al-Kisā'ī, 130.

⁹⁶ Associating things other than Allah with Allah. In other words, worshiping false gods.

3. *The Young and the Guided*

Perhaps unsure that the audience would grasp the theological implication of either the early revelation of the divine realm and/or of Jibrīl's role in Ibrāhīm's astral contemplations, some scholars declared outright Allah's role as controller of Ibrāhīm's development. In his explication of Q 21:51, "We had earlier given Ibrāhīm true direction" (ولقد اتينا ابراهيم رشده), Muqātil interprets "earlier" to indicate while Ibrāhīm was a child and still in the cave.⁹⁷ According to Muqātil then, Allah's guidance of the patriarch began before Ibrāhīm had even the opportunity to see the celestial spheres. Al-Ṭabarī similarly maintains that Ibrāhīm received religious training from Allah and at an early stage. The patriarch's errant attributions of divinity to the non-divine, contends al-Ṭabarī quoting unspecified exegetes, occurred while Ibrāhīm was still a very small child, "before the truth had been revealed to him."⁹⁸ Mujāhid (8th century CE) and al-Suyūṭī (15th century CE) likewise assert that Allah guided Ibrāhīm to the right path when he was a small child.⁹⁹ Others omit reference to Ibrāhīm's youth, although they retain the idea of Allah's steering him to the truth. Ibrāhīm ascribed to the same religious disposition as Lüt (Lot), says al-Majlisī, until Allah Himself guided Ibrāhīm to His religion and steered him clear of error.¹⁰⁰ Ibn Ishāq, transmits al-Ṭabarī, related that since the time of Nūh (Noah), there had been no messengers of the Truth to the people. Allah, therefore, *sent* Ibrāhīm as an argument against the idolatry of his people and as the herald of Allah's creed.¹⁰¹ Allah planned and orchestrated the event; He did not leave Ibrāhīm on his own.

B. *Judaism and the Independent Ancestor*

While the Islamic sources present Ibrāhīm's search and discovery as dependant on Allah's intervention, the Jewish sources utilize this

⁹⁷ Muqātil, 3:83. Of Ibrāhīm's exact age at this time, Muqātil says only, enigmatically, "... and he was younger than Mūsā (Moses) and Harūn (Aaron)." Al-Ṭabarī, in *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 17:32, quotes unnamed exegetes (اهل التأویل, *ahl al-ta'wil*) in reiterating Muqātil's stance.

⁹⁸ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 7:250.

⁹⁹ Mujāhid, 472, 593; al-Suyūṭī, 4:320.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Majlisī, 44–46.

¹⁰¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 1:234 (1/254); idem, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 7:248.

same event to demonstrate precisely the opposite view. Despite differences in some details, both the early and the later midrashic accounts unfailingly support the same overarching premise: Abraham discovered God on his own, using his intellect and powers of deduction. He received no help from others, least of all from God Himself. Rather, Abraham scrutinized the beliefs and the behaviors of those around him and thereby came to an understanding of the truth.

The conceptualization of the forefather as intellectually independent manifests itself quite obviously in the various pre-Islamic midrashic narratives we have seen. Unlike Allah, God does not appear to Abraham in these early Jewish texts until after Abraham's contemplation of the heavens is fully complete and sometimes not till long after that. In other words, God does not become involved in Abraham's life until after Abraham has already established himself as a monotheist; before that occurs, God neither reveals the divine realm to him nor does He, or His angelic servant, guide Abraham in any way toward the truth. Instead, Abraham rejects paganism in favor of the true God through autonomous rational thought and careful consideration of the world around him. He was, *Genesis Rabbah* insists, like an unnoticed bottle of perfume when the divine call came to him for the first time in Gen. 12; though he was full of good scents, and sense, till then he had been left completely on his own. The divine call to Abraham to move simply alerted *others* to Abraham's worthy righteousness much as opening the perfume bottle simply releases the scent but does not create it. Similarly, Josephus writes that the early midrashic Abraham was a person of superior intellect and understanding.¹⁰²

This characterization of Abraham's nature and personality finds further support in the early rabbinic sources. In *Genesis Rabbah* 95:3, the sages pose the question: from where did Abraham, raised among idol-worshipers and pagans, learn Torah? R. Simeon b. Yohai answers, his kidneys were like "two full jugs spouting Torah," as Psalms 16:7 says, "I will bless the Lord who has given me counsel: my reins also instruct me in the night seasons."¹⁰³ R. Simeon's answer reflects the

¹⁰² *Genesis Rabbah*, 39:2; Josephus, *Antiquities*, I:7:1 (154–157).

¹⁰³ The JPS Bible translates according to the metaphoric spirit of the verse: "I bless the Lord who has guided me; my conscience admonishes me at night." The Hebrew word supplanted here by "conscience" is actually "kidneys" (קַלְיָה, *kelayot*). See *The JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society,

ancient belief that the kidneys, along with the heart, served as the body's seat of intellect.¹⁰⁴ According to R. Simeon then, no outside teacher taught Abraham nor did he read any books on the subject. Rather, he discovered the truth using his own natural intelligence. R. Levi, in the same passage, formulates the matter more simply saying matter-of-factly, "Abraham learned Torah by himself." In support of this contention, R. Levi quotes Proverbs 14:14, "the back-slader in heart shall be filled with his own ways; and a good man shall be satisfied from himself." R. Levi sees in this verse a further reference to Abraham, the quintessential "good man," one who dispensed kindness to people. Additionally, R. Levi understands the good man's "satisfaction" as following the path of God; indeed, to the rabbinic mind, there could be no greater satisfaction. According to R. Levi, therefore, Abraham learned of the path of God by himself. No one taught him or guided him along his way.

One should be careful not to misunderstand this *Genesis Rabbah* text, however. The issue under discussion is not Abraham's knowledge of the Torah as the Five Books of Moses and the numerous other books and knowledge currently under that rubric. The Hebrew word Torah derives from the root, **תֹּרֶה** (*yrh*) to teach or instruct. "Torah," therefore, signifies not only the Divine Law but also general instruction, guidance, or spiritual knowledge.¹⁰⁵ The rabbinic discussion centered not on Abraham's familiarity with the Laws of Moses but on his 'Knowledge,' his recognition of God as the True Creator and Lord and his decision to follow His ways. An alternate phrasing of this passage located elsewhere in *Genesis Rabbah* (61:1) confirms this reading. This version refers to the knowledge Abraham gleaned from his own kidneys with the more clear term **חָכְמָה** (*hokhma*), "wisdom." Here, R. Simeon b. Yoḥai poses both the question and the answer. Says R. Simeon b. Yoḥai, Abraham's father did not

1999). This midrash appears in later compilations as well. See *Midrash ha-Gadol*, Gen. 11:28.

¹⁰⁴ Another Biblical use of the heart and kidneys as the home of man's innermost thoughts and thinking appears in Jer. 17:10, "I, the Lord, search the heart, I try the reins (**בַּחַן כְּלֵיָה**), even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doing." Again, JPS translates metaphorically, "I the Lord probe the heart, search the mind."

¹⁰⁵ For example, Pr. 1:8, "My son, heed the discipline of your father and do not forsake the instruction (lit., Torah) of your mother" and 6:20, "My son, keep your father's commandment and do not forsake your mother's teaching (lit., Torah)."

instruct him, nor did he have a teacher (רָב, *rav*); from where, then, did Abraham learn Torah? R. Simeon then answers: the Holy One Blessed be He gave him his two kidneys and these acted as two teachers for him and would spout and teach him wisdom, חכמָה (*hokhma*). In other words, blessed with a natural intelligence, Abraham taught himself the truth concerning the universe and God. The Palestinian *Targum Qohelet* [Targum to Ecclesiastes] concurs, saying Abraham was “a poor boy” but “had in him the *spirit of wisdom* from the Lord.”¹⁰⁶

Lest one still somehow think otherwise—that Abraham did in fact receive instruction from another and did not come upon his discovery of God on his own—an additional passage in *Genesis Rabbah* (39:3) drives home the point.¹⁰⁷ This exegetical exercise bases itself on an early rabbinic understanding of Song of Songs as a parable for the love between God and Israel throughout Israel’s history. This metaphorical reading detects references to Biblical personalities and ancestors throughout the book. Through linguistic analysis, R. Berechiah reads Abraham into Song of Songs 8:8, “We have a little sister who has no breasts: what shall we do for our sister on the day when she shall be spoken for?”¹⁰⁸ R. Berechiah unconventionally reads אֶחָתָה (*ahot*), sister, as a derivative of the same root as the verb אֶחָתָה (*iha*), to collect or unify.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, he reads not “we have a little sister” but “we have someone who collected, unified.” From his youth, then expounds the midrash, Abraham was wont to “collect” good deeds and *mitzvot* (commandments). Moreover, no one instructed Abraham in this behavior. Rather, as Song of Songs indicates, he came to it on his own. “And she has no breasts,” notes

¹⁰⁶ “זהו בה רוח חכמה מִן קְדֻם זֶה” *Targum de Qohelet*, trans. and ed. Luis Diez Marino (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1987), 4:13. Peter S. Knobel, in his translation of the Aramaic targum of *Qohelet* dates the targum to the period following the compilation of the Babylonian Talmud (6th century CE) but before the Arab conquest of Palestine. Knobel discounts Ginsburger’s dating to the era of the Crusader attack on Jerusalem in 1099. *The Targum of Qohelet*, ed. and trans. Peter S. Knobel, The Aramaic Bible, v. 15 (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 15.

¹⁰⁷ A very similar version appears also in *Song of Songs Rabbah*, 8:8 in *Midrash Rabbah ha-Mevo’ar* (Jerusalem: Mekhon ha-Midrash ha-Mevo’ar, 5754 [1993/4]), v. 9, *Sefer Shir ha-Shirim*.

¹⁰⁸ “אֶחָות לְנוּ קְטָנָה שְׁדִים אֵין לָהּ מָה נָעֵשָׂה לְאֶחָותֵינוּ בַּיּוֹם שִׁידּוּכֵר בָּהּ”

¹⁰⁹ In this sense, brothers and sisters are those people collected together, unified by familial bonds.

the midrash further, refers to Abraham, whom breasts did not suckle, i.e., did not instruct regarding observing the commandments or practicing good deeds.¹¹⁰ Raised among sinning people, Abraham should logically have followed in their footsteps and worshiped alongside them. However, he defied their teachings and instruction and came to an understanding of the true nature of the world and of God on his *own*, thanks to the strength of his own character and intellect.

The depiction of Abraham as a self-reliant religious thinker holds true even in those later midrashim that assimilate the Islamic storyline into their texts. As in the case of the sibyllic birth narratives, the Islamic characterization of a forefather guided to the discovery of his Lord does not carry over to the post-Qur'ānic midrashic texts. Rather, these Jewish texts manipulate Ibrāhīm/Abraham's personality back into an independent intellect, with God in the more passive role, in line with the early Jewish understanding of the patriarch and his life. As *Midrash ha-Gadol* 11:28 and *PRE*'s chapter 26 relate, when Abraham exited the cave, his heart wandered among all the heavenly lights, in an attempt to determine which he should worship. After serially worshiping both the moon and the sun, he realized the falsity of his actions and repudiated them. God plays no part in either his analysis or his conclusions. Lest we misunderstand this, *Midrash ha-Gadol* cites the conclusion of the earlier *Genesis Rabbah* 95:3: Abraham had no teacher other than his kidneys, the seat of his intellect. Indeed, this attribute becomes a sort of title for the patriarch. In the medieval *Midrash Avraham Avinu*, after Abraham emerged unscathed from the fiery furnace of Chaldea, his persecutors came before him and entreated him, saying, “Teach us your ways, in which to trust God, o you who had no teacher to teach him except for your two kidneys.”¹¹¹

Sefer ha-Yashar (pp. 27–28) similarly takes pains to ensure the reader understands that no one aided Abraham in his attaining gnosis. This Andalusian text goes out of its way to clarify that although Abraham

¹¹⁰ The use of the feminine as alluding to Abraham may also be an intertextual allusion and play on the aforementioned passages in Proverbs which associate the dissemination of “Torah” with female/motherly knowledge and instruction. Again, Pr. 1:8 writes, “My son, heed the discipline of your father and do not forsake the instruction (lit., Torah) of your mother” and 6:20 instructs, “My son, keep your father’s commandment and do not forsake the instruction (lit., Torah) of your mother.”

¹¹¹ *Bet ha-Midrash*, 5:41.

went to study God's ways in the house of Noah, Noah did not introduce him to God. Rather, Abraham first recognized his Lord while he was standing alone at the mouth of the cave. God's participation in the event, records *Yashar*, is limited to equipping his servant with a "heart that listens and with comprehension."¹¹² How and whether Abraham subsequently utilized God's gift properly remained entirely up to him.

Even the most Islamically influenced of the medieval midrashim—*Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu*, *Ma'aseh Avraham* and the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*¹¹³—strive to remove the appearance of the dictating hand of God from Abraham's discovery of Him. In *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu*,¹¹⁴ this involves a conscious separation between Abraham's astral contemplation and the intervention of the angel Gabriel, whose appearance in this episode betrays its Islamic markings:¹¹⁵ in his attempt to identify God, Abraham mistakenly worships and then rejects first the stars and then the sun. On his third attempt, he worships the moon but when it disappears with the morning light, he comprehends his error and the falsity of astrological worship and declares, "This is not a deity. Indeed, they all have a Prime Mover (מְנִיעָה, *menia'*)."¹¹⁶ While Abraham is yet speaking to himself, Gabriel, the "messenger of the Holy One Blessed Be He," appears out of nowhere, approaches Abraham, identifies himself and salutes God's faithful servant. Abraham then goes off to a certain spring where he washes his hands and face and prays to the Lord.¹¹⁶ Unlike the Islamic case in which Jibrīl

¹¹² בַּיִת שְׁמֹעַ וְחַבּוֹנָה "lev shome'a u-tevuna). The word "tevuna" and its root, בִּין (bin) signify intelligence, insight, having comprehension, discernment, and/or the ability to understand something. See Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew-English Lexicon*, 106–108. That the rabbinic use of the word signifies a natural ability to discern between two things, and not some sort of divine guidance or knowledge, appears in the wording of a blessing recited in the morning prayers: "Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has given the rooster the intellectual ability (*bina*) to discern between day and night." Obviously, God gave the rooster the faculty of discernment, not knowledge of the Divine.

¹¹³ In his prolegomenon to Gaster's translation, Schwarzbaum points out that *Jerahmeel's* take on the Abraham story displays significant parallels with both al-Tha'labī and al-Kisā'i (p. 45). For more on the especially heavy Islamic influence on these three sources, see above, Chapter One.

¹¹⁴ *Bet ha-Midrash*, 1:26.

¹¹⁵ See above for the Islamic insistence upon Jibrīl as Ibrāhīm's religious teacher.

¹¹⁶ *Bet ha-Midrash*, 1:26–27. Haggai Ben-Shammai records some additional, more Islamically oriented Judeo-Arabic Geniza fragments. In these, God sends Gabriel to Abraham before Abraham realizes the significance of his own words and Abraham

interrupts Ibrāhīm before he has a chance to consider the implications of what he has just witnessed or to make any theological declarations, here Abraham is given time to conclude discussing the matter with himself. Only after he has reached his conclusions in favor of God does Gabriel approach him. Additionally, Gabriel does not teach Abraham “his religion” as does Jibrīl. Rather, he simply approaches Abraham and salutes him, wishing him well. Despite its heavily influenced Islamic nature, the author/translator assured that the discovery episode portrayed the Jewish values of Abraham as independent intellect.¹¹⁷

The Judeo-Arabic *Ma'aseh Avraham* dispenses with Gabriel altogether and replaces him with God Himself.¹¹⁸ After Abraham definitively proclaims the falsity of astrological worship, God appears to Abraham and reveals Himself as his Creator. And yet, though God reveals Himself to Abraham, the text does not consider His intervention at this point in the narrative to constitute divine manipulation of the events. As the anonymous author explains, when Abraham rejected astrology, God understood his underlying intention¹¹⁹ and religious conviction. Indeed, God waited until *after* Abraham realized the falsehood of astrology and declared of the sun and moon, “There is no doubt that these have a leader (ولی, *wali*) and master who controls their comings and goings.” Only after Abraham embraced the Truth did God see fit to approach His servant.¹²⁰

The *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* omits completely any communication between the divine realm and Abraham regarding his celestial search, perhaps in order to distinguish itself better from the Islamic narra-

then thanks God for teaching him. The text also includes translated quotes from the Qur'an. See Ben-Shammai, “Sippurei Avraham,” 119–120. On Judeo-Arabic transliterations of the Qur'an, see Lazarus Yafeh, “Al Yahas,” 38–47.

¹¹⁷ As noted in detail above in Chapter One, scholars have concluded that *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu* is most likely an Islamic text translated into a Jewish language on the mistaken belief that it was an originally Jewish text.

¹¹⁸ *Bet ha-Midrash*, 2:XXXIV. Jellinek includes what he claims is a Hebrew translation of the Judeo-Arabic on pp. 118–119. As noted earlier (see above Chapter One, n. 50), the two narratives do not match up.

¹¹⁹ The Judeo-Arabic employs the Arabic word نِيَّاتُهُ (*niyyatahu*), meaning “his intention.” In Islamic religious terminology, نِيَّةٌ (*niyya*), like its Hebrew equivalent בְּוֿתָה (*kavana*), refers to the religiously required intention needed in order for an act to fulfil one's religious obligation to do something.

¹²⁰ The same circumstances appear in Geniza fragments published and translated by Ben-Shammai, 120.

tives to which *Jerahmeel* bears so strong a resemblance. According to this 13th century narrative, Abraham worships first the sun and then the moon before ultimately realizing his error. As soon as he sees the sun rising a second time and blotting out the moon he declares, “Now do I know that neither the one nor the other is lord of the world, but that both of them are servants of another Master, and that is the Lord Who created the heavens and the earth and the whole world.”¹²¹ Neither God nor His messenger Gabriel participates in this moment; Abraham comes to this realization on his own. Still searching, however, Abraham approaches his father and questions him as to the identity of the Creator. Terah, an idol worshiper, points to a large idol in response. Abraham tries three times to feed the idol a sacrifice and three times the idol does not respond. Abraham then becomes enraged at the futility of this pagan worship and “the spirit of prophecy rested upon him”¹²² whereupon, as noted, he recites Psalms 115:5–8:

They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see; they have ears but cannot hear, noses but cannot smell; they have hands but cannot touch, feet but cannot walk; they can make no sound in their throats. Those who fashion them, all who trust in them, shall become like them.

Once again, the Divine refrained from engaging Abraham until after he recognized the fallacious nature of worshiping other than God Himself. Unlike the guided Ibrāhīm, Abraham must reach that conclusion on his own. Only *after* he does, does the ‘spirit of prophecy’ come to him. And when it does, it endows him with the ability to quote prophets who lived long after him, rather than with the understanding of God and the Truth, an understanding he has already attained.¹²³

¹²¹ *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, 34:3.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²³ Sa'adia Gaon and Maimonides often associate ‘prophecy’ with the *Shekhina*, Divine Presence. Some interpreters of Maimonides maintain that he understands both concepts, *nevu'a* (prophecy) and *shekhina*, to correspond to the active intellect itself, which communes with the prophets. See *EJ*, s.v. “Shekhinah,” by Rivka G. Horowitz (14:1349–1354).

Summary

As with the sibyllic prophecy motif, the motif of the patriarch's discovery of God through celestial contemplation displays evidence of mutual intertextual influence. Bothered by the Bible's silence regarding God's sudden call to Abraham, and relying on textual hints *in situ* as well as elsewhere, the early midrashic texts draw a picture of a forefather worthy of divine attention, for he was the first to rediscover God after centuries of pagan devotion. This he did, they understood, by contemplating the nature of astrological signs worshiped by the people around him. While the motif largely disappears from the Jewish radar for close to 800 years, it reappears with renewed zeal in medieval times, after the rise and spread of Islam. Whereas Kister neglects the significance of the timing of motif's reappearance in the post-Qur'ānic age, it is due precisely to the mediation of the Islamic texts that the motif reenters the Jewish milieu. Without the influence of the Islamic narratives that championed the astral search motif in the intervening years, the motif might have remained forever marginalized in the midrashic setting.

Rarely, however, does a motif travel from one tradition to another without modifications taking place to assure that it abides by the values of the adoptive tradition. Just as the Jewish and Islamic sibyllic narratives differed regarding the prophecy's timing, thereby revealing differing conceptualizations of their founding father, so too the Islamic and Jewish discovery motifs differ on one especially vital issue—God's own participation in Abraham's discovery of Him. In the Islamic narratives, both Sunni and Shī‘i, Allah plays an active role in His servant's search and discovery. He reveals Himself to Ibrāhīm, sends him an angel to teach him the Truth, or otherwise guides him in some unspecified fashion. In so doing, the Islamic sources once again depict the course of the patriarch's life as both dependent upon and subject to Allah's will. He does not act independently of his Lord. The midrashic versions, however, reveal a far more active picture of the forefather. His discovery of God depends not upon God's participation but upon his own independent thought processes and choices.

APPENDIX

BT Baba Batra 10a

He [Rabbi Judah, c. 150 CE] used to say: Ten strong things have been created in the world. The mountain¹²⁴ is hard but iron cleaves it. Iron is hard but fire (**תַּלְתַּל**, *ur*) softens it. Fire is strong but water quenches it. Water is strong, the clouds bear it. The clouds are strong but wind scatters them. The wind is strong but the human body bears it. The body is strong but fear shatters it. Fear is strong but wine banishes it. Wine is strong but sleep works it off. Death is stronger than them all. But charity saves from death. As Scripture says, “And Charity will save one from death” (Proverbs 10:2).

Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Ch. 26¹²⁵

Our father Abraham was tried with ten trials and he stood firm in them all. The first trial was when our father Abraham was born; all the magnates and the magicians sought to kill him, and he was hidden under the earth for thirteen years without seeing sun or moon. After thirteen years he went forth from beneath the earth, speaking the holy language; and he despised idols and held in abomination graven images, and he trusted in the shadow of his Creator, and said: “Blessed is the man who trusts in thee” (Ps. Lxxxiv.12).

The second trial was when he was put into prison for ten years—three in Kuthi, seven in Budri. After ten years they sent and brought him forth and cast him into the furnace of fire, and the King of Glory put forth His right hand and delivered him from the furnace of fire, as it is said, “And he said to him, I am the Lord who brought thee out of the furnace of the Chaldees” (Gen. XV.7). Another verse (says), “Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of the furnace of the Chaldees” (Neh. IX.7).

¹²⁴ **תַּלְתַּל** (*har*). The Soncino English translation translates this as “rock.” *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud* (London: The Soncino Press, 1960), New Edition, v. 18:10a.

¹²⁵ Translation from: *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, trans. Gerald Friedlander (NY: Hermon Press, 1965), pp. 187–188.

*God Reveals the Kingdom of Heaven to His Beloved***Genesis 15:1–7¹²⁶**

[1] Some time later, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. He said, “Fear not, Abram. I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great.

[2] But Abram said, “O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless, and the one in charge of my household is Dammesek Eliezer!”

[3] Abram said further, “Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir.”

[4] The word of the Lord came to him in reply, “That one shall not be your heir.”

[5] He took him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.”

[6] And He added, “So shall your offspring be.”

[7] And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit.

Qur’ān 6:74–78¹²⁷

[74] Remember when Abraham said to Azar his father: “Why do you take idols for Gods? I certainly find you people in error.”

[75] Thus We showed to Abraham the visible and invisible world of the heavens and the earth, that he could be among those who believe.

[76] When the night came down with her covering of darkness he saw a star, and said: “This is my Lord.” But when the star set, he said: “I love not those that wane.”

[77] When he saw the moon rise all aglow, he said: “This is my Lord.” But even as the moon set, he said: “If my Lord had not shown me the way,¹²⁸ I would surely have gone astray.”

[78] When he saw the sun rise all resplendent, he said: “My Lord is surely this, and the greatest of them all.” But the sun also set and he said: “O my people, I am through with those you associate (with God).”

¹²⁶ *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Association, 1999).

¹²⁷ *Al-Qur’ān: A Contemporary Translation*, trans. Ahmed Ali (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). As noted in Chapter Two, n. 26, Ali places all the idolatrous utterances in the mouth of Azar, Ibrāhīm’s father, a move not supported by any of the *mufassirūn* surveyed. I have therefore removed these parenthetical attributions from the translation.

¹²⁸ “لَنْ لَمْ يَهْدِنِي رَبِّي لِأَكُونُ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ” Though Bell (as well as Pickthall) employs the present tense, “guide me,” Muhammad Zafrullah Khan and Ahmed Ali utilize the past tense in their translations. See *The Qur’ān*, trans. Muhammad Zafrullah Khan (London and Dublin: Curzon Press, 1975) and *Al-Quran: A Contemporary Translation*, trans. Ahmed Ali (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Hence, I have chosen the past tense, which appears to be more accurate according to the rules set out in W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, 3d ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For an explanation of the specifics of the grammar involved here, see above, Chapter Two, n. 25.

*From “Azkir Gevurot” of Yose ben Yose
(c. 4th–5th century CE) (lines 79–86)¹²⁹*

- (79) They passed as a storm passes and are no longer, and the righteous man, everlasting foundation of the world, arose.¹³⁰
- (80) He strove to understand the secret of creations that act as following a ruler.
- (81) When he saw the sun setting and rising, going out eager as warrior and returning weak,
- (82) And the windows of the sky in the east and in the west, in which the moon daily leaps,
- (83) And lightening arrows and the brilliance of the stars running and returning and no one is absent;
- (84) The confused one became wise, gained insight by himself, and said: These have a master; I will follow [lit. run after] Him.¹³¹
- (85) Before the Lord approached him, he discerned for himself the proper way; [thus it says:] Go forth from death to the path of life.
- (86) Pure in his actions, he spoke heroically:¹³² Please, O Lord of Justice, judge mercifully.

¹²⁹ Yose ben Yose, *Piyutey Yose ben Yose* [Yosse ben Yosse: Poems], 2nd ed., ed. Aharon Mirsky (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1991). The translation of lines 80–84 can be found in Menahem Kister, “Observations on Aspects of Exegesis, Tradition, and Theology in Midrash, Pseudepigrapha, and Other Jewish Writings,” in *Tracing the Threads: Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha*, ed. John Cheeves (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), n. 28. The translation of lines 79, 85–86 is my own.

¹³⁰ “They” refers to the builders of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. According to Mirsky, the wording of the line bases itself on Proverbs 10:25, “When the storm passes the wicked man is gone, but the righteous is an everlasting foundation.” As it typical of liturgical poetry, almost every phrase here derives from a Biblical phrase. Most of these can be found in Mirsky’s notes.

¹³¹ According to Kister (n. 28), this last phrase (אַחֲרָיו אֲרַצָּה, *aharav arutzah*) hints at Song of Songs 1:4, “Draw me after you, let us run” (מַשְׁכֵנִי אַחֲרֶיךָ נָרַצָּה, *mashcheni aharecha narutzah*) and to a now lost midrashic strain that identified the actor as Abraham.

¹³² As Mirsky notes, the phrase דָּבָר נְבוּרֹת (dibber gevurot), used here as a verbal clause, derives from a nominal clause in Job 41:4 (דָּבָר נְבוּרָה, *dvar gevurah*). The meaning of the Hebrew in Job is uncertain and is usually translated as “martial exploits.”

CHAPTER THREE

ON FINGER-FOOD, WET-NURSES, AND FATE

The intertextual interplay evident in the Abraham/Ibrāhīm narratives manifests itself not only in the larger frame-stories of the patriarch's life—the sibyllic prophecies, the story of his birth, his discovery of God—but also in the smaller motifs included in his biography. One of the longer episodes in which this intertextual sharing occurs concerns the narratives of the patriarch's birth. The first half of this narrative sequence came under scrutiny earlier in our study. The present chapter will focus on elements of the latter half of the narrative of the patriarch's birth. Both the Muslim and the midrashic traditions alike speak of the unusual circumstances of the forefather's delivery in a far-off hidden location and Nimrod's/Namrūd's subsequent endeavor to exterminate him. Attempting to save their son's life, both Ibrāhīm's and Abraham's parents hole him up in a cave, away from human eyes and from harm. According to both traditions, the child remains there until he grows old enough to reenter society without fear of the king's edict. At this point in both the Islamic and the midrashic traditions, the frame motif—“child hidden in order to avert death decree”—makes a detour of sorts in order to point to what seems to be only ancillary to the main theme of Abraham's survival in the face of idol-worshiping would-be murderers. This mini-motif concerns the child's survival while hidden in the cave, away from the direct threat of human beings. Both traditions address the same practical issue: from where did the child, hidden away from civilization and care-givers, procure nutrients and nutriments? Once safe from the human threat, how did this isolated infant overcome the threat of starvation?

I. *Finger-Food and the Islamic Tradition*

A. *In the Qur'ān*

The Qur'ān itself does not address either the more specific issue of cave-food or the more general matter of Ibrāhīm's birth altogether.

As we have already seen, the Qur’ān encounters Ibrāhīm as an already mature walking and talking person of unspecified age. Since the story of his birth does not appear at all in the Islamic Scripture, the issue of his survival in a natal cave is of little concern to the Qur’ān. However Ibrāhīm survived childhood, he survived. The Qur’ān’s interest focuses instead on what happened afterward, after his existence as a sentient being was already secured.

B. *The Post-Qur’ānic Corpus*

1. *Finger-Food*

Interestingly, the Qur’ān’s almost complete disinterest in the patriarch’s early childhood does not trickle down to the post-Scriptural accounts. Instead, the post-Qur’ānic sources diverge from the incomplete Qur’ānic presentation, offering a biography that begins years before Ibrāhīm’s initial appearance in the Qur’ān. This early biography is suffused with wondrous acts, miracles that protected Ibrāhīm from the menace of the idolaters. As noted in Chapter One, these later sources maintain that due to a pre-natal prophecy regarding Ibrāhīm’s iconoclastic personality, the king commanded his followers to search out and destroy Ibrāhīm. Thus, the patriarch was born into an age of danger and anti-baby boy decrees.¹ In order to save their son, Ibrāhīm’s parents hid him away in a cave or underground tunnel while he was yet an infant. Wonders did not cease to occur, despite his concealment and distance from the idolaters. According to the Muslim exegetes, Ibrāhīm survived his confinement thanks to nothing less than a miracle. Abandoned in his cave, the future patriarch and friend of Allah did not receive nourishment either from mother’s milk or from some kind of formula. His nutritional needs were met through decidedly more supernatural means—his own body provided it for him. Completely isolated and unaccompanied by adults, relate the sources, the baby would suck on his fingers. For most infants, such a practice would comfort them and quiet their cries. ‘Abd al-Razzāq, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn ‘Asākir, and al-Suyūṭī² declared that this small act provided Ibrāhīm with the nourishment he needed

¹ See Chapters One and Two for a more extensive discussion of this point.

² ‘Abd al-Razzāq (744–827 CE), 1/2:212–213; al-Ṭabarī (838–923 CE), *Ta’rīkh*, 1:234–235 (1/254–255); idem, *Ǧāmi’ al-bayān*, 7:246; Ibn ‘Asākir (1105–1176 CE), *Ta’rīkh madīnat Dimashq*, 6:172; al-Suyūṭī (1445–1515 CE), *al-Durr al-manthūr*, 3:25.

to stay alive. When Ibrāhīm sucked his fingers, they relate, he miraculously found food.

While these four exegetes do not report the exact identity of Ibrāhīm's miraculous finger-food, other sources do provide specifics. Al-Qummī and al-Majlisī assert that Ibrāhīm's extraordinary fingers provided him with leben.³ Interestingly, this is precisely the product most similar to mother's milk.⁴ Other accounts explain that Ibrāhīm's fingers provided him not with one but with a variety of nutriments. Ishāq ibn Bishr maintains that Ibrāhīm's fingers dispensed both leben and honey. In fact, notes Ishāq ibn Bishr, Ibrāhīm's experience with his fruitful fingers serves as the source for the folk saying, "Let a child suck his thumb."⁵ Al-Tha'labī, quoting Abū Zurayq, records a longer version that attributes even more variety to the products of the child's hand. He describes that after Ibrāhīm's mother gave birth to him in the cave, she equipped him with some unnamed needs, closed the cave up on him and left. She would visit him periodically and, on these visits, would often find the child sucking his thumb. One day she decided to investigate his fingers and found, to her surprise, that he was deriving more than emotional support from this behavior. She discovered that one finger provided the baby with water, another yielded milk, another dripped with honey, and butter came forth from the fourth.⁶ Al-Majlisī, building on al-Tha'labī, later increased the number of food-providing digits and added solid food to the list. From the five fingers of one hand, he says, Ibrāhīm derived five different types of nourishment: water, leben, honey, dates, and oil.⁷ Al-Kisā'ī's rendition agrees with al-Majlisī's in number but differs as to the exact identity of the nutriments thereby procured.

³ Al-Qummī (c. 940 CE), 1:206–207; al-Majlisī (d. 1698 CE), *Bihār*, 12:18–19, 29–30, 41–42.

⁴ According to Hans Wehr, the Arabic word for milk in general is related etymologically to the concept of the nursing mother; *laban*, meaning milk, and *labān*, breast, derive from the same root, لبّن (*lbn*). See Wehr's *Arabic-English Dictionary*, ed. J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca: Spoken Languages Services, Inc. 1976), 856–857. Lane similarly defines بنات لبن (*banātu labanīn*) as "the small guts or intestines, in which originate the lacteals; the intestines in which is the milk." لبن (*libān*), defined as "the suckling of milk or of the breast" further emphasizes the Arabic etymological connection between breast and milk. See Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 8:3007.

⁵ Ishāq ibn Bishr (d. 821 CE), 162b. This phrase and the story behind it echo the *mathal* (proverbs) genre. See *EF*, s. v. "Mathal," by J. Knappert (6:815–828).

⁶ Al-Tha'labī (d. 1036 CE), *Qisāṣ al-anbiyā'*, 88.

⁷ Al-Majlisī, 12:18–19.

According to al-Kisā'ī, Ibrāhīm's fingers provided milk, honey, wine, cream, and water. Despite receiving food from his fingers, al-Kisā'ī maintains, Ibrāhīm continued to obtain nourishment through the more conventional methods, which al-Kisā'ī likewise overlays with a miraculous tone. While in the cave, insists al-Kisā'ī, Ibrāhīm acquired food not only from his fingers but he also obtained milk *and honey* from his mother's breasts.⁸

Ibn Ishāq, as quoted by Ibn Hishām,⁹ places the source of the nourishment in different, though nonetheless miraculous, quarters. Like the other exegetes, Ibn Ishāq records that Ibrāhīm's mother did not herself suckle her child. Rather, shortly after giving birth to him in a cave, she returned home and left the child shut up in the cavern. According to Ibn Ishāq, when Ibrāhīm's mother returned to the locked cave to check on her newborn child, she was surprised to find him alive. More surprising, she found him suckling. However, the source was not a human woman, or even his own fingers. Rather, she discovered that while in his cave her newborn son Ibrāhīm suckled from wild beasts.¹⁰ Like Romulus and Remus, the infant twin founders of Rome who were suckled by a she-wolf after being separated from their human mother,¹¹ Ibn Ishāq's Ibrāhīm owed his life to the miraculous generosity and uncharacteristic friendliness of the wild animal kingdom.

2. *Finger-Food as Fate*

While the particulars of the finger-food motif differ slightly from narrative to narrative, the underlying theme remains the same throughout

⁸ مسح ثدي امه لينا وغسلها, "When he rubbed his mother's breast, it flowed with milk and honey," al-Kisā'ī (c. 11th cent. CE), 130. Wheeler M. Thackston translates this as "When he rubbed his mother's breast, it flowed with milk and honey." See *Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisā'ī* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 137–8.

⁹ Ibn Ishāq (d. 768 CE) in Newby, ed., *The Making of the Last Prophet*, 68. Ibn Hishām's death has been calculated at c. 827 or 833 CE. On the problems with Newby's methodology, see Conrad, "Recovering Lost Texts," 258–263.

¹⁰ The idea of animal guardianship appears in al-Kisā'ī as well. As mentioned above, in one account al-Kisā'ī records that at a certain point Ibrāhīm's mother left the cave to return only a few days later. On her arrival at the site, she found animals standing guard. Fearing the worst, she ran inside. To her surprise, she found Ibrāhīm sitting among the animals, who, she realized, had protectively painted his eyes with kohl during her absence. Relieved, she left him in their care and returned to visit every three days. Al-Kisā'ī, 130.

¹¹ *Encyclopedia Americana*, International Edition (Danbury, Conn.: Grolier, c. 1991), s.v. "Romulus and Remus," 23:758.

the sources and it is here that the episode's significance lies. What the infant Ibrāhīm ate and how much he ate serve only as ornaments to the idea that his survival in the cave depended on the supernatural and the miraculous. In other words, even at this early stage of his infancy Ibrāhīm received help from above. The message of the text reads loud and clear through this mini-motif as through the larger frame-story: Ibrāhīm was not a person whose life followed the normal course of human survival and existence. Unlike ordinary people, his birth was foreordained by Allah and foretold to Namrūd. Yet despite the royal edict against him, Ibrāhīm successfully averted death time after time. Our motif serves to emphasize his special status, one which manifested itself even in his infant years: as a baby he did not acquire food through normal human methods. Rather, Allah Himself miraculously provided for His chosen friend by causing Ibrāhīm's own fingers to produce nourishment. Divinely fated for greatness, much like Romulus and Remus who were also destined for greatness and similarly miraculously fed, Ibrāhīm lived in a cocoon of divine protection and guidance, touched by the hand of Allah before having *earned* such a place in Allah's attentions.¹²

Indeed, the narrative voices in a number of the sources strive to ensure our understanding of Allah's role in the event. Perhaps not confident in their readers' ability to grasp the significance of Ibrāhīm's remarkable finger-food, al-Tabarī, 'Abd al-Razzāq, al-Qummī, Ibn 'Asākir, Ibn Ishāq, and al-Majlisī all state the fact of Allah's control of the events outright.¹³ Ibrāhīm's fingers did not *happen* to provide him with nutriments nor was it common in those days for such a thing to occur. Rather, when the infant Ibrāhīm was closed up in his natal cave, they relate, "Allah *gave him* sustenance¹⁴ from his fingers." Ishāq ibn Bishr notes that Ibrāhīm sucked honey and leben from his fingers, for "Allah fed him this way."¹⁵ Al-Suyūtī recounts that Ibrāhīm "got sustenance from his fingers, thanks to Allah."¹⁶ Additionally, al-Kisā'ī records the finger-food item as but one of a series of divinely orchestrated events that occurred to the subterranean Ibrāhīm: the

¹² Other cultures likewise understand suckling from one's own fingers to indicate a child's special status. See Thompson, *Motif Index*, T611.1, T611.1.1, T611.5.1.

¹³ See nn. 2, 3, 9 above.

¹⁴ As noted above, some of these scholars identify the item as milk while others refer to it only generally as sustenance (رزق, *rizq*).

¹⁵ 162b.

¹⁶ 3:25.

angel Jibrīl took his laboring mother to a cave of light where Allah eased her pain; Jibrīl cut the umbilical cord, washed Ibrāhīm, and clothed him; his mother's breasts gave honey as well as milk; Ibrāhīm's fingers delivered a cornucopia of supplies in his mother's absence; and, upon her return, Ibrāhīm's mother found the baby guarded by wild animals, his eyes painted with kohl.¹⁷ Each of these episodes bears the mark of divine protection and election. Indeed, in all of these Islamic narratives, Allah constitutes the literal *deus ex machina*, to the exclusion of all others, which allows the baby to survive. For the Islamic sources, Ibrāhīm's life remains bound to and dependant on the will and designs of the Divine even at this early stage of his life.

To Muslims familiar with a wide-range of *hadīth* reports, the finger-food motif may have transmitted the miracle of Ibrāhīm's predestined status in a more subtle and indirect way as well. We find a *hadīth* in which sucking food from one's fingers serves as a method of attaining wisdom. 'Abdallāh ibn 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ (d. 683–684 CE), an early convert to Islam and a contemporary of Muḥammad's, dreamed one night that he had honey on one of his fingers and butter on the other and saw himself licking the fingers of both hands. On the morrow, he reported his dream to Muḥammad. Muḥammad explained that 'Abdallāh would in the future read two books, the Torah and *al-Furqān* (the Qur'ān).¹⁸ Interestingly, the wisdom 'Abdallāh attained through his fingers refers specifically to religious knowledge, knowledge of Allah. One is thus given to understand that when Allah placed honey and oil in Ibrāhīm's fingers for him to suck, He very likely also thereby imparted to His friend knowledge of the divine in the form of both the Torah and the Qur'ān.¹⁹

3. *Exceptions to the Rule: Wet-Nurses*

Despite the almost universality of the finger-food motif and its miraculous implications, a divergent narrative strain does appear. These narratives maintain that the infant Ibrāhīm derived his food through far less impressive means, in which Allah played no direct role. Here Ibrāhīm obtained mother's milk the old-fashioned way—from nursing

¹⁷ Al-Kisā'ī, 130.

¹⁸ Al-Dhahabī (1274–1348) vehemently attacked this tradition in his *Ta'rīkh al-Islām* (3:38), a fact which provides us with a terminus a quo. See Kister, "Haddīthū," 231.

¹⁹ This account supports the contention in Chapter Two that the Islamic tradition teaches that the patriarch did not independently come to know Allah. Rather, Allah led Ibrāhīm to discover Him.

mothers, his own or someone else's. Muqātil ibn Sulymān and al-Tha'labī, transmitting in the name of Ibn 'Abbās and al-Suddī, present the most "natural" and expected scenario. They recount that Ibrāhīm's mother herself would visit him frequently in his hiding place with the express purpose of nursing him.²⁰ Al-Tha'labī records an additional tradition, in the name of al-Suddī, emphasizing the role of Ibrāhīm's mother as the source of his food. According to al-Suddī, Ibrāhīm's father hid Ibrāhīm's mother in the subterranean vault along with their child. Though al-Suddī does not mention nursing specifically, the inclusion of Ibrāhīm's mother in the vault implies that Azar provided the infant with both adult supervision and with provisions.²¹

Ibn 'Asākir and Ishāq ibn Bishr separate the child from such a direct connection to his mother as food-source while nonetheless retaining the human element of the episode. Both transmitters report that Ibrāhīm's mother would visit him while he was in his cave and would feed him there. However, they point out, she did not nurse him herself. Rather, she brought him milk from mothers whose newborns had been killed in accordance with the royal decree from which Ibrāhīm was hiding. Indeed, note the authors, there was so much milk, so many women whose infants had been ripped from them donated milk to his cause, that Ibrāhīm grew large quite quickly.²²

However, while these four Islamic sources include this more human-oriented wet-nurse narrative, they consistently display a measure of ambivalence about it. Ishāq ibn Bishr, Ibn 'Asākir, and al-Tha'labī do not allow the motif of the human nurse to stand by itself. All three exegetes supplement it with the contrasting finger-food theme and its contradicting implications for Allah's active role in Ibrāhīm's life. It is as if all three were aware that the idea of the human wet-nurse did not portray the scene accurately, despite its having been transmitted as an element of the narrative. And so, they followed it with the more miraculous finger-food scenario.

Similarly, whereas Muqātil includes only the wet-nurse theme, the editor of his text, 'Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāta, makes sure to discredit this motif and its less-than-predestinarian insinuations. According to Shihāta, the wet-nurse narrative constitutes nothing other than *isrā'iyyāt*,

²⁰ Muqātil (713–767 CE), 1:570; al-Tha'labī, 88.

²¹ Al-Tha'labī, 88.

²² Ibn 'Asākir, 6:169; Ishāq ibn Bishr, 162b.

narratives originally by or about Jews and considered by traditional authorities to be exegetically and factually unreliable.²³ He additionally points out that Muqātil does not include an *isnād* for this narrative, a sin of omission which demonstrates the narrative's illegitimacy. Indeed, Shihāta insists, no *isnād* for this wet-nurse tradition exists either here or in the larger corpus of the *sunna*. This fact, combined with the actual content of the motif, confirms the theme's spuriousness and indicates that it should not be taken as correct or true, he insists. Thus, we see that doubts as to the validity of an Islamic wet-nurse motif in the Ibrāhīm biography occur in the texts of three of the sources, and in the interpretation of the fourth, in which it appears.

4. *Wet-Nurses and the Jewish Connection*

Shihāta's accusation of possible Jewish influence on Muqātil's work does not stand without merit or support, nor is Muqātil's narrative alone among the four mother's-milk texts to display links to the Jewish tradition. Ishāq ibn Bishr (d. 821 CE), as well as Muqātil (c. 713–767 CE) lived in the period of Islamic history in which it was common practice among Muslims to rely on Jewish material regarding biblical figures. Indeed, *hadīth* reports encouraging such practices are well-known.²⁴ Muqātil specifically, although admitted to be a Qur'ānic commentator of the first rank, was castigated by later authorities for his frequent inclusion of Jewish legends.²⁵ Al-Tha'labī, like Muqātil, produced a work of Qur'ānic exegesis acclaimed by a long line of biographer-critics as very thorough and trustworthy. However, also like Muqātil, al-Tha'labī's *qīṣāṣ* work received appreciably fewer accolades because of his utilization of *isrā'īliyyāt*, a common occurrence among works of the *qīṣāṣ* genre.²⁶ As for the 12th century Ibn 'Asākir, though strictly speaking his work falls under the rubric of history rather than *qīṣāṣ*, his text nonetheless retains a strong

²³ For more on the definition of *isrā'īliyyāt*, see S. D. Goitein, "Isrā'iliyyat," *Tarbiz* 6, 1 (1936):89–101; *EI*², s.v. "Isrā'iliyyāt," by G. Vajda (4:210–211); and above, the Introduction.

²⁴ See Kister, "Haddithū . . .," 215–239.

²⁵ Finkel, "An Arabic Story of Abraham," 393. Later authorities also accused Muqātil of anthropomorphism, a charge which contributed to their view of him as of questionable reliability. See *EI*², s.v. "Muqātil ibn Suleymān," by Andrew Rippin (7:508b); Joseph Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra* (Berlin and New York: William de Gruyter, 1991–1997).

²⁶ Goldfeld, "The *Tafsīr* of 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbās," 134.

connection to the *qīṣas* narratives, and hence to their Jewish collocation. According to James Lindsay, Ibn ‘Asākir’s work roots itself in the *qīṣas* literature and, in fact, serves as a preserver of the *qīṣas* narratives.²⁷ Ibn ‘Asākir’s history includes narratives concerning no fewer than twenty-six Biblical and extra-Biblical prophets. Often, the style and content of these reports appear more worthy of the *qīṣas* than of the historical genre. More importantly perhaps, Ibn ‘Asākir quotes Muqātil’s *qīṣas* as his source for the wet-nurse motif; as we have seen, later Muslim scholars considered Muqātil’s work to be unduly overrun with Jewish influences. Given the connections to the Jewish tradition displayed by these variant texts, we turn now to the Jewish sources themselves for a look at their treatment of the issue of the feeding of the infant patriarch while in his underground lair.

II. *Finger-Food and the Jewish Tradition*

A. *Pre-Islamic Midrashic Accounts*

As with the sibyllic prophecy motif, the virtual universality of the finger-food theme in the Islamic literature leads one to expect some reference to a similar idea in the post-biblical pre-Islamic Jewish narrative corpus. As noted previously, many of the Islamic narratives regarding biblical characters reflect earlier midrashic influence and sensibilities²⁸ and the commonality of material between the two traditions seems especially appropriate in the biography of Abraham/ Ibrāhīm, the first of the patriarchs. Indeed, Sidersky, champion of the idea that Jewish-Islamic similarities derive mainly from Jewish influence on Islam, includes even this smaller episode as part of the Ibrāhīmic biography that he traces wholly to pre-Islamic midrashic narratives on Abraham.²⁹

Despite these expectations, as well as Sidersky’s claims, the pre-Islamic Jewish sources remain almost universally silent on the matter. The issue of how Abraham was fed while an infant evokes not

²⁷ James Lindsay, “‘Alī ibn ‘Asākir as a Preserver of *Qīṣas al-Anbiyā*: The Case of David b. Jesse,” *Studia Islamica* 82 (1995/2): 45–82.

²⁸ See above, Introduction.

²⁹ Sidersky, *Les Origines*, 33–34. The error of Sidersky’s claims has already been demonstrated in Chapter One, pp. 39–41 and *passim*.

even the slightest attention from the pre-Islamic midrashists. This silence should not surprise the reader of the early midrashic biography of the forefather, however. As described earlier regarding the sibyllic narratives, the early midrash conceives of Abraham's birth and childhood as normal and routine.³⁰ Unlike his Islamically drawn counterpart, no prophecy preceded the early midrashic Abraham's entrance into the world; his mother, as a result, did not have to hide either her pregnancy or the birth in order to keep her child safe from the murderous eyes of the king's minions; consequently, Abraham was not hidden in a cave while growing up. Depicting Abraham's entrance into the world as normal, unaccompanied by miracle and mystery, the early midrash thus saw no need or reason to assume that Abraham fed from anything other than his mother's breast. Most certainly, no reason existed to represent him as sucking from his own fingers. Indeed, the midrashic silence on the issue indicates the opposite; according to the pre-Islamic Jewish narratives, nothing out of the ordinary regarding food occurred in Abraham's infancy—with respect neither to his birth nor to his survival to youth—that merited noting.

In fact, the only pre-Islamic Jewish texts that refer to Abraham as a confined person do so completely outside the context of his birth and childhood. According to *BT Baba Batra*,³¹ R. Hanan bar Rava maintained that Abraham was imprisoned for 10 years, seven in Kutha and three in Cardo. R. Dimi disagreed with this sequence, arguing that the forefather spent seven years in Cardo and only three in Kutha.³² That the confinement under discussion does *not* constitute an attempt at saving the child's life stands clear from the vocabulary of the Talmudic text. The Talmud here does not employ the Hebrew for "hide" or "conceal" but rather נְהַבֵּשׁ ("nehbash"), from the root חַבֵּשׁ (*hbš*), meaning "to bind" or "to restrain."³³ Thus, the

³⁰ See Chapter One.

³¹ *BT Baba Batra* (6th cent. CE) 91a. This passage reappears in the 8th century CE *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 26.

³² The obvious question comes to mind: why are the rabbis discussing Kutha and Cardo, two cities not actually mentioned in the Abrahamic text of Genesis? Rav Hisda clarifies the matter, explaining that the smaller of the two Kuthas situated on the Euphrates canal is also known as the Ur of Chaldees. And, as Genesis 11:31 indicates, Ur was Abraham's hometown. This will be discussed in greater length below.

³³ See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, eds., *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. "נְהַבֵּשׁ" p. 289.

confinement about which the rabbis argued in this passage cannot refer to Abraham's concealment in a cave while an infant. Rather, it speaks instead of his later imprisonment by Nimrod for his anti-idolatry beliefs and polemics.

Similarly, Pseudo-Philo³⁴ recounts that Abraham was detained and imprisoned on account of his religious beliefs and ensuing actions rather than for the fact of his birth. According to this mid-first century CE text, when the inhabitants of Babel began to build their infamous tower, Abraham and eleven other righteous men refused to participate. The building of the tower, they realized, was intended as an act of rebellion against God and carried with it overtones of idolatry.³⁵ When questioned about their defiance, they declared that they worshiped one God alone and would not be coerced into worshiping any other. For their stubborn rebelliousness, the captains of the city condemned the men to death by incineration. Joktan, the first prince of the captains and a monotheist himself, persuaded his cohorts to imprison the men for a week while the captains considered other punishment options. That night, Joktan sneaked into the prison, released the prisoners, and encouraged them to escape to the mountains where they would find provisions he had hidden for them earlier.³⁶ Abraham, however, refused to flee, relying instead on God's

³⁴ James, *The Biblical Antiquities of Philo*, 90–94.

³⁵ Genesis 11:4 reads, "And they said, Come let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven, and let us make us a name (שֵׁם, *shem*) lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The Aramaic targums and *Genesis Rabbah* (5th century CE) 38:6 translate this verse into Aramaic as an idolatrous episode: "Let us build a city and a tower . . . and let us put an idol atop it with a sword in its hand, maybe it will arrange for itself military ranks to fight him who will scatter us around the earth." R. Ishmael (in *Genesis Rabbah* 38:11) and R. Natan (in *BT Sanhedrin* 109a) explain that the word שֵׁם (*shem*, name) in the Bible always refers to the worship of stars. Lane's analysis of the Arabic cognate سُمُّ (*samu*) supports the rabbinic reading of *shem* as an idol. Lane (4:1435) defines the noun form, سَمِّي (*samī*) as "a competitor, or contender for superiority in highness, loftiness, eminence or glory." See *Neophyti I* (1st–2nd century CE), ed. Alejandro Diez Macho (Madrid-Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1968); *Targum Yonatan ben Uzziel 'al ha-Torah* (1st century BCE–1st century CE), ed. Moshe Ginsburger (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1903); and, *Targum Yerushalmi la-Torah* (not later than 7th–8th century CE), ed. Moshe Ginsburger (Jerusalem, 1969).

³⁶ Joktan's behavior calls to mind the later interactions between Reuben and his brothers in Genesis 37:17–23: The brothers plot to kill Joseph and throw his body into a pit, thus ridding themselves of their father's dreamy favorite son. In an attempt to save Joseph's life, Reuben offers up a counter plan. He proposes that they throw Joseph alive into a pit and thus spare themselves the ignominy of fratricide. According to the narrator, Reuben planned to return later to rescue the youth.

protection of His faithful servants. At daybreak, the rest of the captains marched over to the jail to retrieve their prisoners and carry out their punishment. To their shock, they found it empty save one voluntary prisoner: Abraham.³⁷

B. *Post-Qur'ānic Midrashic Accounts*

Though the pre-Islamic midrashic texts make no reference to an attempt to hide Abraham from Nimrod's minions, and therefore omit all food issues, the post-Qur'ānic midrashic accounts embrace precisely this Islamic idea of concealment.³⁸ Like their Islamic predecessors, these later Jewish accounts tell that Abraham survived Nimrod's death squads due to his parents' hiding him in a far-off cave. However, while these midrashic birth-cave narratives reflect the imprint of the earlier Islamic texts in terms of the frame-story, they consistently reject the Islamic accounts of precisely how the forefather survived while in the cave itself. Some sources follow the path laid out by the pre-Islamic midrashic texts; they omit any reference to the practical details of feeding the child, thereby conveying that nothing unusual had occurred. Others include the issue of feeding but do so only to contradict the Islamic accounts outright, insisting and emphasizing that humans, not God, took care of Abraham's nutritional needs.

1. *Neither Fingers, Nor Food*

The eighth century CE *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* (PRE) constitutes the earliest of the post-Qur'ānic midrashic texts to deal with the issue through avoidance. As the author relates, Abraham's beginning years

According to Fred Winnett, by the 6th BCE a tradition had developed among the Southern Arabians that they had descended from a common ancestor, Yoqtān. It is “reasonably certain,” he writes, that Yoqtān and the Biblical Joktan are one and the same. In the Islamic period, this ancestor was known as Qahtān. See his “Arabian Genealogies in the Book of Genesis,” in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament*, ed. Harry Thomas Frank and William L. Reed (Nashville and NY: Abingdon Press, 1970), p. 181.

³⁷ Psuedo-Philo continues: the people then condemned Abraham to death by fire and threw him into a furnace built specially for the occasion. Just then, an earthquake hit the area and the flames shooting from Abraham's fire burned 8,500 townspeople. Abraham emerged completely unscathed however and the furnace then promptly fell apart. The patriarch traveled to the hills, informed the 11 hiding monotheists of the events that had transpired, and led them back to town.

³⁸ On the cave-birth in the Abraham context as an originally Islamic idea, see Chapter One, pp. 55–61.

were spent in the shadow of the royal decree against him, for he was born under a regime that wanted him exterminated. In order to avoid death, Abraham was hidden underground for the first thirteen years of his life. Unlike the earlier and more descriptive Islamic texts, the particulars of the situation—how the child ate, drank, and grew to puberty while hidden in a subterranean tunnel—here remain undisclosed. Instead, the *PRE* narrative simply jumps from mentioning Abraham’s hiding to the next idea: at the end of thirteen years Abraham came up from underground already speaking the Holy Tongue, and went about despising idolatry, destroying idols, and worshiping his Creator.³⁹ Rather than portray Abraham as the recipient of divine feeding and intervention, *PRE* simply avoids the topic of food altogether.

The 13th century CE Italian/Spanish *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* likewise includes the Islamic motif of the cave while similarly avoiding the issue of Abraham’s sustenance.⁴⁰ According to the more detailed *Jerahmeel*, when Nimrod learned that a child had been born who would overthrow his kingdom, he turned to his advisors for help. Although they did not yet know the boy’s identity, they suggested that the king offer to buy the sought-after child from his parents and then kill him. Only one advisor, Terah, disparaged the idea; the astrologers understood immediately that a son had been born to Terah recently and demanded that he turn the child over to them. When his attempts to thwart them failed, Terah ran home. He hid the infant Abraham in a cave for the next three years. Though eloquent regarding the details until this point, as well as later on in Abraham’s biography, *Jerahmeel* remains conspicuously silent on the issue of how the child ate while thus hidden for those three long years. Rather, like *PRE*, *Jerahmeel* moves directly and silently from this point straight to Abraham’s discovery of God, with little concern for the day-to-day particulars of the patriarch’s intermittent life and how he survived it.

2. Wet-Nurses: *Sefer ha-Yashar* and *Midrash ha-Gadol*

The 11th–12th century Andalusian *Sefer ha-Yashar* and the 13th century Yemenite *Midrash ha-Gadol* (*MG*) fill in the blanks left by *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and *Jerahmeel* regarding Abraham’s underground expe-

³⁹ *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 26.

⁴⁰ *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, 34:1–3.

rience. However, like the “quieter” texts, as well as the pre-Islamic midrashic accounts, *Yashar* and *MG* remain steadfast in rejecting the Islamic idea of the miracle of finger-food. For these post-Qur’ānic Jewish sources, Abraham’s sustenance derived from purely natural human sources.

According to *Sefer ha-Yashar*,⁴¹ Nimrod’s astrologers learned that the newborn son of Terah would ultimately grow to overthrow the king after they witnessed odd astrological behavior on the night of the child’s birth. They advised the king to buy the child from his parents and then kill him. *Yashar*’s Terah, like *Jerahmeel*’s, tried to argue with Nimrod, but his arguments ultimately proved futile. Granted a three day respite during which he was to think over the king’s offer, Terah hurried straight home. He grabbed Abraham, Abraham’s mother, and Abraham’s wet-nurse and placed the *three* of them in a hidden cave. He then returned to the king with the child of a servant. Appeased, Nimrod made no further demands of him. For the next ten years, relates *Yashar*, Terah would visit the cave once a month in order to bring provisions to all its inhabitants. In opposition to the Islamic sources that preceded it, *Yashar* thus blatantly insists on the non-miraculous: Abraham’s food came first in the form of mother’s milk provided by a human woman and later by provisions smuggled to him by his father. Indeed, in the attempt to ensure our understanding of the human aspect of Abraham’s feeding, *Yashar* engages in something akin to what James Kugel terms “midrashic overkill.”⁴² According to this theory, the text could have effectively communicated the human input into Abraham’s suckling by including only his mother in the cave, or only a wet-nurse, or by referring only to Terah’s food smuggling. Any of these three facts alone would have transmitted the same message, that Abraham’s nourishment came from human sources. In its zealousness to distance itself from the Islamic idea of the miraculous, *Yashar* overkills the motif, unnecessarily including all three—mother, wet-nurse, food-smuggling father.

Although *Midrash ha-Gadol* deletes Abraham’s mother from the cave adventure, here too the narrative insists on a human woman as the

⁴¹ *Sefer ha-Yashar*, 26–27. The full story of Abraham’s birth has already been discussed in detail in Chapter One, pp. 56–57.

⁴² Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House*, 38.

object of Abraham's suckling.⁴³ Once again, the narrative relates that Nimrod insisted on buying Terah's newborn son from him. As he did in *Jerahmeel* and *Yashar*, here Terah rejected the offer. He then hurried home and hid Abraham and the child's *wet-nurse* in a cave, where they remained for three years. Like *Yashar* and *Jerahmeel*, *Midrash ha-Gadol* includes the cave-dwelling motif as part of the Abraham narrative while simultaneously rejecting outright even the implication of a divine hand in his life at this early stage. Instead, like *Yashar*, *MG* insists upon the presence of the human wet-nurse, shut up in the cave with him for the express purpose of providing Abraham with a source of food.

C. *Breast Feeding as Independence*

As we have seen, while incorporating the Islamic frame-motif of the natal cave, the post-Qur'ānic midrashim unilaterally depart from the Islamic narratives regarding the child's supernaturally provided diet, and insist instead on a non-miraculous source of food. In uniformly rejecting the finger-food motif, the post-Qur'ānic midrashic sources uniformly reject its implication that the patriarch was divinely chosen and guarded at this early stage of his life. Rather, the post-Qur'ānic midrashim remain consistent with the pre-Islamic texts whose silence on the issue indicates that in their view, Abraham's survival in infancy bore little, if any, connection to the divine realm; his early childhood proceeded along the same lines as that of any other child in that he was nurtured by human hands, without miracles. In either remaining silent like their pre-Islamic midrashic predecessors, or in recounting outright that Abraham acquired food from his mother or a wet-nurse—a proven, no-fail source of nourishment—the post-Qur'ānic midrashic narratives reinforce the midrashic insistence on the absolute normalcy and relative ordinariness of the patriarch's early existence.⁴⁴

⁴³ *Midrash ha-Gadol*, Gen. 11:28. The full account of Abraham's birth has already been discussed in Chapter One, pp. 57–58.

⁴⁴ On the evocativeness of the ordinary, see Alain de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 135ff.

D. *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu*

Indeed, the only post-Qur'ānic midrashic source to include any sense of the miraculous in the feeding of the patriarch is precisely that medieval text classified by scholars as a Hebrew translation of an Islamic, not Jewish, work. The divergence from the more 'normative' Jewish narratives thus interferes little with the otherwise uniform Jewish portrayal of an early Abraham free from the thumb of divine pre-determinism. According to this text, *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu*,⁴⁵ Abraham, like Ibrāhīm, hides alone in the cave; no mother or wet-nurse accompanies him. Like the Arabic sources upon which it is modeled, this medieval narrative instead relates that Abraham's nourishment, like Ibrāhīm's, spouted from a supernatural source and included more than just mother's milk.

*Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu*⁴⁶ recounts the episode with a good measure of detail. According to this narrative, after Abraham's mother birthed him in a nearby cave, she looked down on the newborn child and declared, "I fear for you greatly; if it becomes known about you, Nimrod will kill you." Understanding that she could not divert her child's ultimately mortal fate, she decided it was better for him to die in the cave in which he had been born than for her to see him killed at her breast. She took a piece of clothing which she had with her, dressed the infant in it, and set him down. "May your God be with you and save you, and not desert you," she said and then went home.⁴⁷ Abraham did not have a wet-nurse while he was in the cave, points out the narrator, and at a certain point he began to cry. God, however, heard his cries and sent the angel Gabriel to keep Abraham alive; Gabriel provided his charge with milk, which he brought from the fingers of his right hand.⁴⁸ Abraham nursed in

⁴⁵ See *Bet ha-Midrash*, 1:26ff. *MAA* first appeared in print in Constantinople in 1580. The text's problematic inclusion in a Jewish corpus has already been discussed in Chapter One, pp. 67–70.

⁴⁶ *Bet ha-Midrash*, 1:26.

⁴⁷ This move recalls Hagar's treatment of the sick and dying Ishmael after the pair was exiled from Abraham's home. Unable to watch her child dehydrate to death, Hagar casts Ishmael under a bush and sits herself down the distance of a bowshot away. "Let me not look on as the child dies," she says and then bursts into tears (Gen. 21:15–16).

⁴⁸ From the language of the text, one cannot tell whether the milk dripped from Gabriel's finger or from Abraham's own hand, though it would seem that Gabriel caused the milk to drip from Abraham's own fingers: *וְשַׁלַּח לְנָבְרַאָל הַמְּלָאֵךְ לְחַיּוֹת אֲוֹרֶה וְלֹהֶת לוֹ חֶלֶב בַּיְהָ מְצַאָה לוֹ חֶלֶב מַאֲצַבְעֵה הַמִּן הַהָּזֶה וַיַּקְרַב* (ve-shalah le-Gavriel

this fashion until he was 10 days old and was able to walk about the land on his own.⁴⁹

III. *Finger Food and the Egyptian Underground*

If the Islamic narrative's use of the finger-food motif carried with it implications of Ibrāhīm's chosen status, a condition eschewed by the midrashic tradition, why does the latter allow even remnants of the theme to enter its corpus? Puzzlingly, the issue of Abraham eating while underground occurs not in one but in the majority of the post-Qur'ānic Jewish sources on the patriarch's life, despite the silence of the pre-Islamic midrashic corpus on the matter. In addition, although these later Jewish sources go out of their way to transform the fruitful fingers into normal suckling, they nonetheless leave themselves open for the possible intrusion into the midrashic realm of unwanted ideas and contrasting values. Indeed, this is precisely what seems to have occurred with *MAA*.

As in the case of the birth prophecy motif, this problem leads the student of the text to a similar narrative strain in the pre-Islamic midrashic accounts relating to the birth of Moses. With Abraham's entire early biography simply missing from the Biblical text, there

ha-ma'pakh le-ḥayot oto ve-latet lo ḥalav ki haya motzi lo ḥalav me-etzba'o ha-yamin ve-haya yoneq mi-meno, “and He sent Gabriel the angel to keep him alive and to give him milk for he would extract milk from his right finger and he would suck from it/him.”). Haggai Ben-Shammai's manuscript fragments from the Cairo Geniza, also said to be Islamic accounts but in Judeo-Arabic, relate the same narrative. However, they add honey to the nutrients Abraham thereby miraculously imbibes. See Ben-Shammai, “Sippurei Avraham,” 111–133. Gabriel's appearance in the Abraham context will be addressed in the following pages.

⁴⁹ Jellinek, in his *Bet ha-Midrash*, includes also a shorter Judeo-Arabic narrative, entitled *Ma'aseh Avraham* (2:xxxiv–xxxv), for which he provides what he claims is the corresponding Hebrew version (2:118–119) taken from the Bible commentary of Bahya ben Asher (13th century CE). Bahya, Jellinek reports, took it from *Bereishit Rabbati* of R. Moses ha-Darshan (1st half 11th century CE). In the Judeo-Arabic account, Terah hides Abraham and a wet-nurse in a cave for 13 years. In the Hebrew, Terah hides Abraham in a cave for 3 years, with no wet-nurse. Instead, God provides him with two windows “הַלּוּנָה” (*halonot*) which bring forth oil and flour. According to Louis Ginzburg's *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909–1938), 5: 210, n. 14], one should read “סְלִינָה” (*sillonot*, spouts). Despite repeated attempts, I could not find this account in *Bereishit Rabbati*. See Moshe ha-Darshan's *Bereishit Rabbati*. The Islamic nature and provenance of Jellinek's text and the undeniable disparities between the Judeo-Arabic and the Hebrew have been discussed in Chapter One, n. 50.

remains no inherent exegetical reason for depicting the infant as the object of the king's wrath. Neither do textual problems require locating Abraham's birth and childhood specifically in a cave, a situation in which the issue of his food would come into play. It appears more likely that the Abraham context was not the original setting for this midrashic pericope. Indeed, the earliest Islamic or Jewish mention of infants born and raised underground, accompanied by unusual sources of nourishment, first appears in the midrashic traditions relating not to the birth of Abraham but to the birth of Moses. And, it is here, in the Moses setting, that we find an exegetical reason for the specific formulation of the cave narrative. As such, it is here, in the Moses context, that the answer to the question of why the midrashic tradition allows the penetration of Islamic influences into their narratives may lay.

A. The Biblical Narrative and the Israelites in Egypt

While the Bible provides no context for the birth of Abraham, it details quite clearly the circumstances into which Moses was born. According to Exodus 1:8–2:11, sometime after the death of Joseph a new Pharaoh comes to power in Egypt, one who “knows not Joseph.” Noting that the Hebrews who lived among them were becoming more and more numerous, the Egyptian Pharaoh worries that they might one day form a fifth column, fight against the Egyptians, and leave the land. So Pharaoh begins a plan of oppression, placing taskmasters over them, forcing them to build cities for him, embittering their lives with slave labor and with bondage. Not satisfied, Pharaoh also commands the Hebrew midwives to kill all newborn Israelite boys at birth. However, the midwives are God-fearing women and, claiming that the Hebrew women give birth too quickly, before the midwives even arrive, they refrain from fulfilling Pharaoh's orders. So Pharaoh issues another command: all newborn boys are to be thrown into the Nile. In the midst of all this, relates the text, an anonymous Levite couple gives birth to a baby boy. Seeing that her son is “good,” the mother conceals her child from the Egyptian authorities for three months. Then, no longer able to hide him, she builds a waterproof ark, lays her son inside, and places it in the reeds by the river's bank. The boy's sister stands guard, watching to see what will become of him. The daughter of Pharaoh finds the baby, brings him to the palace, and raises him there as her son, Moses.

B. In the Babylonian Talmud

While this Biblical pericope appears complete and straightforward, the Talmudic scholars found it troublingly lacking. As such, the Talmud presents an expanded version of the narrative, one organically connected to the text of Exodus and one which provides the earliest mention of miraculous feedings. *BT Sotah* (c. 6th century CE) 11b relates: when Pharaoh issued his decree calling for the death of all newborn Israelite baby boys, the Israelite women grew exceedingly fearful. Unwilling to sacrifice their sons to the murderous regent, laboring Israelite women would drag themselves out to the far-off fields and give birth to their sons there, underneath the apple trees, and then return home.⁵⁰ God would then send down one of the denizens of the Upper Heavens to cleanse and beautify the newborn. God Himself would gather two round stones, one providing oil and one honey, from which the infants would suckle. Now, when the Egyptians realized what the Israelites were doing, they went to the fields to kill the children. However, a miracle occurred and the earth swallowed the children alive. The Egyptians countered by bringing oxen and ploughs and plowing up the earth, but to no avail. After the Egyptians had gone, the Israelite children sprouted up from the ground like grass. When they had grown enough so that they were no longer at the vulnerable age, in danger of being killed under Pharaoh's command, they returned to their homes. When God revealed Himself to the children of Israel through the miracles at the Red Sea, these children were the first to recognize Him.⁵¹

The main difficulty in the Biblical text that led to the creation of this narrative appears to be the silence that follows Pharaoh's command in Exodus 1:15–22 to kill all the newborn Israelite boys. Moses, Exodus tells, escaped death by being hidden first at home for three months and then in an ark on the river. Scripture remains silent, however, as far as the other Israelite boys are concerned. What happened to those babies who were not as lucky as Moses and did not escape Pharaoh's decree? Were they killed? If so, a theological prob-

⁵⁰ According to a version in *Exodus Rabbah* 23:5 (9th century CE), the women did not abandon their children willy-nilly but entrusted them to God's care, saying, "Lord of the Worlds, I have done my part. Now is the time for You to do Yours." See *Exodus Rabbah* in *Midrash Rabbah ha-Mevo'ar*, v. 2. On the dating of this text, see Appendix C.

⁵¹ See also *Exodus Rabbah*, 23:5 and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, 42.

lem arises: how could God allow for the murder of so many innocents? A more pressing textual question exists as well. Scripture never makes further mention of these small victims of Pharaoh's ruthlessness. If the children were killed, why does the Bible not record that fact? Indeed, the Bible, champion of recording the numbers of those who died of plague, war, and/or punishment,⁵² records neither the fact nor the number or the familial affiliation of any missing babies. Equally problematically, the children of Israel are never reported to have "cried out in anguish" over this obvious and especially horrific tragedy. When they do cry out, it is only much later, after Moses is already grown, married, and living in Midian with his father-in-law. And, these cries result not from the specific horror of having their children murdered but from the general torment of slavery. "The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God," emphasizes Exodus 2:23. In the face of all these questions, the narrative of *BT Sotah* teaches that the Bible omitted both the deaths of the infants as well as their parents' mourning because the children did not actually die. Instead, the narrative relates, they were born and raised in the far-off fields, away from the Pharaonic decree, where God Himself cared for and guarded them.

The details of the Talmudic account, in addition to the overarching idea of undead children, find their origin in the Bible. Indeed, for each and every point made in the narrative, the Talmud itself cites proof texts.⁵³ The underlying principle of each citation, and to some extent of the narrative as a whole, concerns the rabbinic understanding of the location in time of the transformation of the children of Israel into the *nation* of Israel. According to the language of the Bible, when the children of Israel went down to Egypt, they formed a family, albeit a large one. Until that point, and even somewhat afterward, the Bible identifies them consistently by their familial relationship, the "sons" or "children of Israel," the "sons of Jacob,"

⁵² Some examples of this in the Five Books of Moses are: Ex. 32:28 (Levites kill 3,000 who sinned with the Golden Calf), Num. 16:35 (a fire consumes 250 members of Korah's rebellious group), Num. 17:14 (a plague falls 14,700 as punishment for attacking Moses and Aaron in fall-out over the Korah incident), Num. 25:9 (24,000 worshipers of Ba'al Peor die in a plague).

⁵³ I have separated these from the text in order to allow for easier reading of the narrative.

or even the “brothers of Joseph.”⁵⁴ By the time Pharaoh began his sinister plotting against them, the family had begun to develop into a nation. The king of Egypt’s very specific terminology expresses just such a state of flux. “Behold,” says Pharaoh to his people, “the *nation of the children of Israel*”⁵⁵ (Ex. 1:9). Still a family unit—“children of Israel”—they had begun at the same time to take on the characteristics of the larger entity of a nation, **עַם** (*‘am*). Unable to discern precisely what category they fit but recognizing in them elements of both, Pharaoh refers to them with both terms, **עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל**, the Nation of the Children of Israel.⁵⁵

This first-time usage of the term *‘am* to refer to the descendants of Jacob did not escape rabbinic notice. Indeed, the rabbis of our pericope agreed with Pharaoh’s understanding that Israel’s maturation from family to nationhood occurred in the land of its oppression, under the rule of a murderous king who “knew not Joseph.” Moreover, as the accompanying proof texts demonstrate, the rabbis of *BT Sotah* 11b took this understanding of the Israelites’ development one step further; they identified the moment of transformation from the family known as the “children of Israel” into the nation known as “Israel” precisely with the births of those missing children against whom the Egyptian Pharaoh directed his decree. This association between Israelite nationhood, the land of Egypt, and the missing boy-children, and the reflection of this association both in Exodus and at other Scriptural points forms the linchpin of the *Sotah* narrative.

Song of Songs provides the source for the opening statement of the *Sotah* narrative in which the Israelite women in Egypt give birth to their sons in the fields. Though Song of Songs is, on its very basic level, a love poem written in both the male and female voices, traditional exegesis views the book on a metaphorical level, a symbolic expression of the love between God and His people Israel. Thus, *Sotah* reads Song of Songs 8:5, “Under the apple tree I roused

⁵⁴ Among others examples of this, see Gen. 42:5, 45:21, 46:5, 8; Ex. 1:1, 7.

⁵⁵ As opposed to the term **עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל** (*‘am yisrael*), the Nation of Israel, which first appears only *after* the exodus from Egypt, after the Israelites had completed the initial phases of the conquest of the land of Israel (Joshua 8:33). The term appears subsequently with some frequency throughout the Bible: 1 Sam. 9:16; 2 Sam. 3:18; 7:11; 18:7; 19:41; 1 Kings 6:13; 8:15; 14:7; 16:2, 21; Jer. 7:12; 30:3; Ezek. 14:9; 25:14; 36:12; 18:14; 38:16; 39:7; Amos 7:8, 15; 8:2; 9:14; Dan. 9:20; Ezra 2:2; 9:1; Neh. 7:7; 1 Chron. 11:2; 2 Chron. 6:5; 6:6.

you; it was there your mother was in labor with you, there she who bore you was in labor with you,”⁵⁶ on a national level rather than a personal one. No longer a dialogue between two human lovers but between a nation and its God, the birth under discussion refers not to that of a specific human being but to the birth of the nation. To the rabbinic mind aware of the Exodus episode and of the precise terminology utilized there, this occurred in Egypt during the rule of the evil Pharaoh. Moreover, the verse alludes not only to the metaphysical national birth of Israel but to the actual physical births of those people who would constitute that polity. As Song 8:5 indicates, the births of all the other boys were not recorded because, as God notes there, they occurred in secret, in the apple fields to which their mothers fled fearing Pharaoh’s biblically recorded decree.

The idea of outdoor births finds further support in a verse quoted by *BT Sotah* from the book of Ezekiel, who emphasizes the abandonment of the children as well as God’s role in saving them. God speaks to the people of Jerusalem through Ezekiel and reminds them of their cruel past. Says God in 16:2–5, “Oh mortal, proclaim Jerusalem’s abominations to her and say: . . . on the day you were born, you were left lying, *rejected in the open field*.” Keeping in mind the introductory verse which indicates that the audience was not an individual listener but the general Israelite polity, the exegetes read this verse as: when you, the children of Israel, were born—that is, became the entity known as the Nation of Israel—you were left rejected in the open-fielded wilderness that was the oppressive land of Egypt in which you were forced to abandon your children in the fields, literally.

As indicated by the Talmud’s continued employment of this verse, Ezekiel, continuing to quote God, then reveals what happened next to these children. Full of pity, God stepped in and acted as their nursemaid, cleaning, anointing, and clothing the deserted children. “I bathed you in water, and washed the blood off you, and anointed you with oil,” says God (Ezek. 16:9). In opposition to the Bible, the later *BT Sotah* narrative asserts that God, Who is incorporeal, did not attend to the children Himself but sent down from heaven one who tended to the children in His stead. Very likely, the description of God as a nanny struck the exegetes as too anthropomorphic

⁵⁶ חחת התפוח שוררתיך שם הבלתי אפשר שם חבלת ילדה...”

and so they reassigned the task to a divine messenger. A Jewish audience, and even the exegetes themselves, would not necessarily have recognized a disparity between God's use of the first person "I" in the verse and *BT Sotah*'s substituting a divine messenger; Jewish law states that if a person sends another to do a good deed for him, the action is credited to the sender as if he had done it himself.⁵⁷

God's utilization of oil- and honey-bearing stones in order to feed the newborn children who remained alone in the fields, the earliest midrashic instance of our miraculous food motif, finds its source likewise in a biblical verse indicating Israel's outdoor national birth. In his address to the people at the end of his life, Moses poetically recounts the miracles of their history to them one last time. Moses reports that God "found" His people Israel "in a desert region, in an empty howling waste. He engirded him, watched over him, guarded him as the pupil of His eye" (Deut. 32:10). As in Ezekiel, the exegetes read the "desert region" in which God found His nation as both a literal and figurative reference to the deserts of Egypt.⁵⁸ There in the wilderness of Egypt God brought His forsaken children—the nation Israel, as well as the cast-off children of that nation—under His protection and ensured that they were appropriately nourished. As Moses reports, "He [God] made him [Israel or Israelites] to suck honey from the crag and oil from the flinty rock" (Deut. 32:13).⁵⁹ Reading this verse literally as well as figuratively, the exegetes understood that God acted as a sort of wet-nurse for deserted Israelite babies, providing them with two miraculous rocks which, when sucked, provided the children with food, in the fashion of breast-feeding.

⁵⁷ For more on this concept, see *EJ*, s.v. "Agency" by Nahum Rakover and Editorial Staff, (3:349–354).

⁵⁸ The verse in Deuteronomy employs the word מִדְבָּר (*midbar*), while *BT Sotah* and Ezekiel use שָׂדֶה (*sadeh*). Usually translated as "desert," Brown, Driver and Briggs (p. 184, s.v. מִדְבָּר, *dbr*) note that *midbar* actually means "wilderness" or "tract of land used to pasture flocks and herds." *Sadeh*, like *midbar*, indicates an open field, the country, or cultivated ground (p. 961, s.v. שָׂדֶה, *sdh*). The difference between the two terms appears to be a matter of intent. *Midbar* denotes an uncultivated and wild yet arable plot of land while *sadeh* indicates an intentionally cultivated plot located similarly on the outskirts of habited areas. Land that is not arable and in which little grows, what we usually think of as a desert, is שְׁמָמָה, *shemama*, (p. 1031, s.v. שְׁמָמָה, *šmm*).

⁵⁹ Interestingly, the verse uses the verb יָנִiqְהַי (yaniqeihu, he caused him to suck) from the root יָנַק (yng), more commonly associated with breast-feeding. Perhaps not coincidentally, the food in this verse recalls the food that God provides for Israel in Ezek. 16:13: "Your food was choice flour, honey, and oil" (16:13).

Similarly, the land's swallowing the children and the subsequent Egyptian plowing traces back to a literal reading of a figurative description of the development of the nation of Israel. In Psalms 129:1–3, the psalmist takes the voice of the collective Israel, saying: "Much have they afflicted me from my youth up, let Israel now say. Much have they afflicted me from my youth up, but they have not prevailed against me. The plowers plowed upon my back, they made long their furrows." Just as the rabbis read "births" both literally and allegorically so too they took "youth" to carry a double meaning: (a) the youth of the nation, the years of transformation and amalgamation under the Egyptian slavery and affliction, and (b) the youths, the children born in that period who ultimately formed the nation. Thus the verse suggests that when Israel was young, the Egyptians strove to destroy them through an attack on their young; the Egyptian brutes tried to dislodge the children from their underground hiding places by literally plowing the area in which they had been hidden.

A similar literal reading of analogous agricultural imagery in Ezekiel provides the impetus for what happened next. As God reminds the now-grown nation of Israel (Ezek. 16:7), "I let you grow like the plants of the field; and you continued to grow up until you attained maturity." Like plants which begin underground in seed form and blossom aboveground into an often unrecognizable new entity, God caused the Israelite children to break out of their underground confinement, come up through the ground and return home enough changed and matured so that they no longer resembled the endangered infants whom the Egyptians sought.

That these saved Israelite babies were the first to recognize God at the Red Sea derives from yet another literal reading of a Biblical phrase. After the Israelites escaped from Egypt and crossed the Red Sea without being dragged back into slavery by their pursuers, they broke into epic song exalting God. "This is my God," they cheered, "and I will glorify Him" (Ex. 15:2). "This" (זה, *zeh*) in Hebrew, as in English, is a demonstrative pronoun, used when one can point to a physical object, which one cannot do with the aphysical God. The exegetes therefore understood that some recognizable aspect of God appeared to the Israelites at the Red Sea. But, how did these people who had never had personal physical contact with their Lord recognize Him, Who is aphysical? Explains the midrash, these words were uttered by those contemporaries of Moses who were tended to

by God's own hand. In fact, the verse that introduces this "Song at the Sea," as Exodus 15 is traditionally known, identifies the singers as "משה ובני ישראל" (*Moshe u-v'nai yisrael*), Moses and the Children of Israel. One might also read *u-v'nai yisrael* according to its literal meaning, the *sons* of Israel. Having experienced God first-hand when He tended to them in the fields, these sons, born at the same time as Moses but saved through vastly different means, recognized Him immediately through His behavior when He presented Himself at the Red Sea. It was they who now joined their contemporary (Moses) in song and proclaimed of their familiar protector, "*THIS* is my Lord."

C. From Israelites to *Banū Isrā'īl*

The imprint of the exegetically created Talmudic narrative materializes in an Islamic rendition of the Israelites' experience in Egypt. This Islamic version provides us with the first clue to understanding how the finger-food motif morphed from the Talmudic rocks of the Israelite babies to the wet-nurses of the later midrashic Abraham, for it serves as a mediating text between the two. According to al-Kalbī, as cited by al-Tha'labī, when Fir'awn commanded the slaughter of the Israelite babies, the Israelite women took to carrying their male children off in the middle of the night to a desert (الصحراء, *al-sahrā'*), valley, or mountain cave.⁶⁰ There they would hide their sons and then return home to their families alone. Allah would send one of His angels to supply the child with food and drink. The infant would then remain in the care of the angel. This divine creature would anoint him with oil and feed him until the child was old enough to return home without fear of being murdered by Fir'awn's agents.⁶¹

Two significant elements indicate that the transmission of the finger-food motif and its surrounding account occurred from the midrashic to the Islamic traditions, rather than vice versa. Most

⁶⁰ Lane (4:1654) defines *al-sahrā'* as a desert, a waste, "a tract of land like the back of a beast, bare or destitute of herbage, without trees, without hills and without mountains." This parallels the Hebrew *shemama* rather than *sadeh* or *midbar*, the two words used by the midrashic texts to indicate a tract of land on which some sort of vegetation grows or could grow. Perhaps this dissimilarity of terms led al-Tha'labī to include the two other options, valley or mountain cave. Interestingly, in his translation of the Bible into Arabic, Sa'adia Gaon sometimes translates *sadeh* as *al-sahrā'* (e.g. Gen 2:5; 24:63; 25:27) and sometimes as ضياع (*day'a*, country estate) (e.g. Gen. 23:9ff.). Sa'adia's translation of these verses can be found in *Keter Torah*.

⁶¹ Al-Tha'labī, 252–3.

notably, all the main elements of this later Islamic account appear in the earlier 6th century CE pre-Islamic midrashic narrative: Fir‘awn’s death decree, like Pharaoh’s, forces the Israelite women to flee to the outskirts of civilization in an attempt to save their progeny; in both the midrashic and Islamic traditions, the women neglect to leave provisions with their hidden children; God/Allah steps in to care for them and feed them by dispatching an underling to provide the children with food. Moreover, both texts end the pericope by relating that these well-fed boys eventually mature enough to return home to their families without fear of succumbing to the decree. Even the Islamic ambiguity of the exact nature of the hiding place—desert, valley, or mountain cave—reflects a similar tension in the two midrashic tellings (*midbar v. sareh*).⁶² Additionally, the earlier midrashic passage contains what the Islamic version does not: proof texts for each point. When this biblical narrative expansion, created as exegesis for a difficult biblical passage, later entered the Islamic environment because of its value as Israelite history and as glorification of Allah’s name and power, the proof texts fell by the wayside. When woven into the midrashic narrative, these verses demonstrate the organic exegetical relationship between the biblical text and the narrative derived from it. They were, however, irrelevant to the Islamic tradition which did not rely upon the Hebrew Bible as sacred text and so were left out as extraneous.

D. *From Banū Isrā’īl to al-Sāmirī to Mūsā*

An addendum to the Islamic narrative demonstrates further the path our motif took from the Talmud’s Egyptian context regarding the Israelite infants to Ibrāhīm’s biography and then on to the later Abrahamic setting. According to al-Kalbī, although the general population of Israelite children born on the outskirts of civilization received unspecified food and drink from one of Allah’s angels, one child, named al-Sāmirī, received special treatment from a special care giver, the archangel Jibrīl; under Jibrīl’s care, al-Sāmirī would suck oil from one of his thumbs and honey from the other.⁶³ This

⁶² See n. 58.

⁶³ Al-Tha’labī, 253. Al-Kalbī adds that in addition to the finger-food the angel himself would lactate in the morning and evening thus supplementing Ibrāhīm’s diet with “mother’s” milk.

early angelic encounter, explains al-Kalbī, enabled al-Sāmirī to recognize Jibrīl later at the crossing of the Red Sea, though the rest of Banū Isrā’īl did not know him.⁶⁴

Al-Ṭabarī, citing Ibn Jurayj, relates a somewhat modified form of the episode.⁶⁵ According to Ibn Jurayj, the larger narrative concerns not the mass of Israelite children but revolves around one child in particular who was hidden, fed by an angel, saved and later recognized his savior. When Fir‘awn hatched his dangerous plan, Ibn Jurayj asserts, the mother of one named al-Sāmirī said to herself, “I cannot keep the child here, nor can I see him killed.”⁶⁶ And so, she placed him in a cave and closed it up upon him. Jibrīl then came and “put all that his soul needed into his mouth” and made him suckle honey and leben. Now this, notes Ibn Jurayj, is how al-Sāmirī recognized the angel at a later date, when Jibrīl appeared at the Red Sea to help the Israelites across and thus depart Egypt.⁶⁷

How or why these Islamic sources came to identify the general mass of Israelite newborns with the specific person of al-Sāmirī becomes clearer when we uncover the identity of this mysterious and favored child in the Islamic sources. In the Qur’ān (20:83–98), the *tafsīr*, and the *qīṣāṣ*, this child is the same person who later created the golden calf that the Israelites worshiped in the desert in place of Allah; al-Sāmirī, who lived among the Israelites in some capacity, took dust from the footprints of a horse, threw it in the fire, and out came a calf. He then presented the calf to the people as their god (v. 91, “‘This is your god and the god of Mūsā.’”).⁶⁸ Though the

⁶⁴ According to al-Kalbī, this refers to al-Sāmirī’s statement in Q 20:96, “I saw what they did not see.”

⁶⁵ *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 16:204–205.

⁶⁶ Abraham’s mother expresses this same sentiment in *M44*. See above, p. 155.

⁶⁷ In his *Ta’rīkh*, 1:421–2 (1/489), al-Ṭabarī records the opposing view of al-Suddī who related that when al-Sāmirī saw Jibrīl on his horse, he did **not** recognize him as the divine messenger who had cared for him. Al-Sāmirī knew only that the event was a momentous one and so he gathered dust from the horse’s footprint.

⁶⁸ The Qur’ān does not state clearly whether the horse in question belonged to Mūsā or Jibrīl. See Halperin, “Can Muslim Narrative be Used as Commentary on Jewish Tradition?” 73–88.

A. S. Yahuda asserts that the Qur’ānic legend of al-Sāmirī and the calf entered the Islamic canon when a Jewish informant related the biblical story of King Jeroboam of Israel (I Kings 12:28–29) to Muhammad. In an effort to fortify his rule against the kingdom of Judea, home of the Temple, Jeroboam erected two calves of gold, placed one in Bethel and one in Dan and declared to his subjects, “Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” The

Qur'ān mentions him by his *laqab* (surname), al-Sāmirī, the Scriptural text provides no further information on the man's proper name, national or tribal affiliation, background, or any other similarly identifying factors. Several extra-Qur'ānic traditions nonetheless insist on a close relationship between al-Sāmirī and the Israelites. Muqātil ibn Sulaymān refers to him as "al-Sāmirī, one of the Banū Isrā'īl."⁶⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, quoting earlier anonymous exegetes ("ahl al-ta'wīl"), supports Muqātil's characterization, adding that al-Sāmirī rejected the religion that had been revealed to Mūsā.⁷⁰ Similarly, Qatāda and al-Suddī, both cited by al-Tha'labī, insist that al-Sāmirī was the greatest of the Israelites, from the tribe of Sāmira, who, as an adult, strayed from the path of Allah and became a hypocrite. Other accounts state that he belonged to a foreign people and joined up with Banū Isrā'īl at the exodus from Egypt.⁷¹ Ibn Kathīr (1301–1373 CE) thus identifies him as a member of an unnamed cow-worshiping neighboring nation.⁷² Al-Ṭabarī, citing Ibn 'Abbās, and Ibn Qutayba record accounts identifying these foreign cow-loving people as the tribe of Barjama.⁷³ Like al-Tha'labī, Ibn 'Abbās maintains further that al-Sāmirī was of a foreign people who happened to be in Egypt at the time and so joined up with the Banū Isrā'īl when they left.⁷⁴

Other accounts draw more specific and intense connections to Banū Isrā'īl, associating al-Sāmirī with their leader, Mūsā ibn 'Imrān.

Qur'ānic al-Sāmirī reflects Jeroboam both in deed and in words. In his telling, states Yahuda, the Jewish narrator referred to Jeroboam as "al-Sāmirī" because Jeroboam was crowned in Shechem (I Kings 12:1), the Samaritan sacred center in Muḥammad's day. Muḥammad later unintentionally combined this story with the account of the golden calf in Exodus 32. See Yahuda, "A Contribution to Qur'ān and Hadith Interpretation," 286–290. Interestingly, Jeroboam's words to the Israelites in the Land of Israel reflect Aaron's when he built the original golden calf for their ancestors in the desert, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (Ex. 32:4). This is likely an intentional intertextual reference, intended to hint/warn that just as Aaron's calf-building ended badly for the Israelites, so too will Jeroboam's.

⁶⁹ Muqātil, 3:37.

⁷⁰ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 16:200.

⁷¹ Al-Tha'labī, 253; see also al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 1:425 (1/493). Al-Suddī recounts the same story but with no specific allusion to al-Sāmirī's genealogy. However, the text seems to suggest that al-Sāmirī belonged to Banū Isrā'īl (*Tafsīr al-Suddī al-kabīr*, 347).

⁷² Abū al-Fida' ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm* (Riyad: Dār al-ṭaybah, 1997), 5:291.

⁷³ Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 CE), 20; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 1:422–425 (1/492–493). One account specifies his "real" name as Mnj' and states that he worked as a goldsmith; See also al-Tha'labī's (253) citation of Sa'īd ibn al-Jubayr that he was of the people of Kirmān.

⁷⁴ *Ta'rikh*, 1:425 (1/493).

Al-Rāzī (d. 1209 CE) records Ibn ‘Abbās’ statement that al-Sāmirī was an Egyptian client (جَار, *jār*) of Mūsā ibn ‘Imrān.⁷⁵ Ibn Qutayba insists on yet a closer affiliation; al-Sāmirī was not only a full-fledged Israelite but a cousin of Mūsā ibn ‘Imrān.⁷⁶ David Halperin points out that this identification of al-Sāmirī with Musa may stem from the fact that some traditions portray the two men as sharing the same first name; al-Sāmirī’s “real” name is often recorded as Mūsā ibn Ẓafār.⁷⁷ The similarity between their names, he suggests, may have led some of the *mufassirūn* to assume a familial connection.⁷⁸

In addition to identifying al-Sāmirī with Mūsā ibn ‘Imrān in name, the Islamic tradition attributes similar biographies to the two men. The extra-Scriptural narratives cast them both as Egypt-born non-Egyptians who faced persecution at the hands of the authorities but who survived thanks to the bravery of their mothers and the input of the Divine. Significantly for the issue at hand, their biographies attribute the survival of both Mūsā and al-Sāmirī in part to their childhood ingestion of finger-food. During the era of Fir‘awn’s anti-baby boy decree, describe al-Tha‘labī and Ibn ‘Asākir, Mūsā’s and al-Sāmirī’s mothers alike attempted to save their sons’ lives by sending them out of the house. While al-Sāmirī’s mother left him in a field, Mūsā’s mother—in line with both the Qur’ān (20:37–40) and the Bible (Ex. 2:3–4)—placed her infant in a small ark on the water. Al-Sāmirī survived his ordeal because Allah sent Jibrīl to nourish him from the food that dripped from his fingers when he sucked them. Mūsā too was sustained by miraculous fingers; his ark was eventually found by Pharaoh’s wife, Āsiya, who noticed it floating in the waters in which she was bathing. When she opened it up, she

⁷⁵ Halperin, 80.

⁷⁶ Ibn Qutayba, 20.

⁷⁷ See also al-Tabarī, citing Ibn ‘Abbās, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:425 (1/493); al-Tha‘labī, 253; Ibn Qutayba, 20. According to Halperin (p. 80), al-Maqdisī (fl. 966 CE), al-Maybūdī (fl. 1126 CE), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144 CE), and al-Baydawī (d. 1286 CE) also record his name as Mūsā ibn Ẓafār, or Mūsā ibn Ṭufayr. Al-Maqdisī and al-Maybūdī also state that the two Mūsās were related.

⁷⁸ Al-Kisā’ī (194) records a tendency to confuse Mūsā ibn ‘Imrān with yet another Mūsā. The people of the Torah, he explains, claim that the Mūsā who traveled with al-Khiḍr was Mūsā ibn Manasseh ibn Yusūf. ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Abbās, speaking on the authority of the Prophet, insisted that al-Khiḍr’s Mūsā was Mūsā ibn ‘Imrān. The same identification of the two Mūsās appears in al-Tabarī’s *Ta’rīkh*, 1:372–3 (1/424) in a tradition attributed to Sa‘īd ibn Jubayr who cites Nawf as the source of the identification. Sa‘īd notes that this detail was repeated before Ibn ‘Abbās who replied, “Nawf lied.”

saw a young boy whose sustenance, the narratives relate, was provided by Allah, Who caused leben to exude from the child's fingers when he sucked them (”وَقَدْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ رِزْقَهُ فِي أَبْهَامِهِ يَمْصُّ مِنْهَا لَبَنًا“) *wa-qad ja'ala Allahu rizgahu fi ibhāmihī yamussu minhā labanā*).⁷⁹

The existence of the finger-food theme in the al-Sāmirī/Mūsā context in both al-Tha'labī and Ibn 'Asākir testifies to a possibly once more widespread use of the motif in the Mūsā context. Ibn 'Asākir, for example, does not name the earlier al-Tha'labī as a source but refers to an entirely different string of people who reported the account, including both the very early Muqātil and Ishāq ibn Bishr.⁸⁰ This possibly once more extensive familiarity with a Mūsā finger-food motif likewise appears in al-Ya'qūbī (d. 897 CE), also an early source. In relating the history of Mūsā in Fir'awn's house, al-Ya'qūbī includes the odd statement that Mūsā grew more quickly than regular boys.⁸¹ This creates a logical problem: once in Fir'awn's house, Mūsā, unlike the children hidden underground, has no reason to grow quickly. The Israelites born in the fields matured faster so that they would not be detected as having been born during the king's death decree, but well beforehand. Mūsā, however, was adopted as an infant and taken into the protective custody of the royal home. He thus had no reason to mature quickly. Al-Ya'qūbī's statement here adds neither to the flow nor to the logic of the narrative; instead, it indicates an Islamic case of Kugel's "midrashic overkill."⁸² It seems instead to be the remnant of an earlier narrative in which Israelite baby boys, possibly even al-Sāmirī or Mūsā in particular, were hidden out of town, fed through their fingers, and returned to their homes after a miraculous growth spurt that offered them protection from death. At some point, the narrative either fell out of use or al-Ya'qūbī, or his editors, chose to omit it. However, the motif refused to disappear entirely. Rather, its imprint remained in this illogical and unnecessary, yet telling, phrase.

⁷⁹ Al-Tha'labī, 205; Ibn 'Asākir, 61:22. Ibn 'Asākir's *isnād* (.... Ishāq ibn Bishr—Muqātil and Juwaybir—al-Dahhāk—Ibn 'Abbās) includes Muqātil as a tradent; this account is missing from Muqātil's *tafsīr*.

⁸⁰ 61:20. The full *isnād* reads: *anba'anā Abū Turāb Haydara ibn Aḥmad wa-Abū al-Wahsh Subay'u ibn Mūslim, qāla: anā Abū Bakr al-Khaṭīb, anā Abū al-Ḥasan ibn Rizqwayhi, anā Ahmad ibn Sindī, anā Ismā'il ibn 'Isā, anā Ishāq ibn Bishr qāla: wa-akħbaranī Muqātil wa-Juwaybir 'an al-Dahhāk 'an Ibn 'Abbās, annahu qāla.*

⁸¹ Al-Ya'qūbī, 31.

⁸² See the Introduction, above.

Given the above information, it strikes the reader of the narratives that the first step the Talmud's finger-food motif took in its journey from the Egyptian context toward the Abraham/Ibrāhīm milieu was through the Islamic account of the more specific Mūsā/al-Sāmirī. Indeed, the Mūsā/al-Sāmirī narratives stand as analogs of the Moses-era narrative to which the motif is organically and exegetically bound and in which it initially appears. As such, it appears logical that when the motif entered the Islamic tradition, it did so in reports concerning similar or coterminous characters.

The transformation of the narrative concerning an unnamed mass of Israelite children to one which singles out specific persons, Mūsā or al-Sāmirī, for finger-food attention can be attributed to the nature of the Islamic literary genre in which our motif appears. When the midrashic narrative expansion became divorced from the biblical text from which it originally stemmed and entered the *qīṣāṣ/hadīth*, the need to explain both the fate of the unmentioned sons and the puzzling Biblical silence of their parents no longer existed. On top of this, the Islamic tradition, specifically the *qīṣāṣ*,⁸³ concerns itself more with the biographies of the prophets than with the general population. In this environment, a miraculous story attributed to unnamed people would likely shift to a prophet's biography in order to demonstrate or even prove that prophet's miraculous nature and life. Thus the outdoor births, the divine tending, and the miraculous finger-feeding of the unnamed Israelites shifted to the shoulders of their contemporary, Mūsā. When the identity of al-Sāmirī became associated with Mūsā, a similar narrative was told about him as well. Even the difference in the precise nature of the food source between the Jewish and Islamic traditions, rocks v. the child's own fingers, can be attributed to the transference of the motif from the Jewish to the Islamic milieu. In its more human form (fingers), the motif emphasizes the uniqueness and divinely touched nature of the child himself. Whereas the Israelites suckled from divinely manipulated rocks, Mūsā/al-Sāmirī were themselves, through their very physical beings, the very vehicles for Allah's miracle and blessing.

⁸³ Represented here by both al-Thaqlabī and Ibn ‘Asākir. See Lindsay, 45–82.

E. *Closing the Circle: From Mūsā to Ibrāhīm and then to Abraham*

It should not surprise us that once the Israelite finger-food motif entered the Islamic milieu from the midrashic context, it subsequently became associated with yet other prophetic figures, Ibrāhīm especially. After all, one of the goals of the *qīṣāṣ* literature, as well as of the *ḥadīth*, is to emphasize similarities between the different monotheistic prophets in order to establish a continuity of prophecy and thus an eventual legitimization of the prophetic status of Muḥammad.⁸⁴ As such, a mark of prophecy in one individual is likely to appear in the narratives of other prophets as well. Mūsā's and al-Sāmīrī's Allah-given ability to feed themselves from their fingers constitutes but one sign of their divinely favored and fated status. In accordance with the underlying message of the *qīṣāṣ/ḥadīth* genre, Ibrāhīm, the founder of monotheism and likewise a prophet, would logically exhibit the same signs of a miraculous nature and of Allah's protection. Thus, it seems the motif shifted easily from Mūsā, or al-Sāmīrī, to Ibrāhīm. Like his Israelite descendants, the prophet Ibrāhīm survived his isolation thanks to his divinely sent food. Like Mūsā/al-Sāmīrī, Ibrāhīm's very body demonstrated Allah's favor and grace.

When later Jewish traditions encountered the cave-birth and finger-food theme in its newly formatted Ibrāhīmic form, it likely struck a familiar chord. Jewish exegetes, after all, would have recognized the motif from the earlier midrashic narrative of the chased and abandoned stone-fed Israelites of Egypt, upon which it is modeled. Moreover, one of the principles of traditional Jewish exegesis maintains that events that occurred to the patriarchs prefigure what will occur to their descendants.⁸⁵ For both these reasons, the narrative would not have been, and indeed was not, rejected outright by the later midrashic scholars. Yet the later midrash could not allow itself to accept wholly the account as it stood in Islam. The idea of the forefather suckling from his own fingers represented an anomaly to the Jewish understanding of their forefather. As a man who chooses his own fate, a man who remains untouched by unusual and other-

⁸⁴ See the Introduction.

⁸⁵ This principle is known as “משׁ אבּוֹת סִימָן לְבָנִים” (*ma'asei avot siman le-banim*, the actions/events of the fathers are signs for the sons). For elaboration of this principle, see the commentary of Nachmanides (13th century CE) on Genesis 12:6 in his *Perushai ha-Torah le-Rabbeinu Moshe ben Nachman*, ed. H. D. Shevel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1959).

worldly circumstances until *after* he proves himself fully as a loyalist to the monotheistic god, Abraham could *not* have experienced that which the Islamic texts attribute to Ibrāhīm. According to the midrashic mind, Abraham could not have received anything from his fingers other than typical infant psychological comfort. Therefore, the midrashists modified the motif to fit their own value system: born in a distant and isolated cave, Abraham nonetheless acquired his food the old-fashioned human way, from nursing women.

Summary

As in the case of the prophecy of Abraham's birth, the finger-food motif appears in its earliest form as a pre-Islamic midrash relating to the Pharaonic command to kill all Israelite boys. In its earliest configuration, the motif constitutes an exegetical response to textual and theological difficulties inherent in the biblical text of Exodus. By weaving together various verses, all of which base themselves on the idea of the birth of Israel as a nation on Egyptian soil, the exegetes created a fluid narrative expansion organically related to the Exodus episode. The finger-food motif constitutes but one element of this narrative. At some point, this exegetical midrashic tale regarding the birth of anonymous boys entered the Islamic corpus where it was reformatted to fit its new environment. Divorced from the biblical text from which it originally grew, the subject of the narrative shifted from anonymous Israelites to their more famous contemporary, the prophet Mūsā.

From here, it was no long leap to Ibrāhīm. Like Mūsā, Ibrāhīm re-founded monotheism after a long period of idolatry. Moreover, Ibrāhīm fathered both the Israelites and the Muslims, their accompanying prophets (Mūsā among them), and remains their prophet extraordinaire. As such, the Islamic tradition saw fit to bestow upon him a biography that confirmed his miraculous and divinely ordained status by relating, among other elements, that Ibrāhīm attained nourishment from his fingers during his days of isolation. This motif, now attached to Ibrāhīm, eventually found its way back to the midrashic milieu. The post-Qur'ānic midrash, however, summarily rejected any insinuation of divine protection and election regarding the infant Abraham, paradigm of free-choice and independence. And so, while integrating the Islamic frame story of the patriarch's birth and begin-

ning years into its own texts, the midrash turned the miraculous fingers, which had begun as miraculous rocks, into the very mundane, very ordinary and very human wet-nurses. Thus, the later midrash remained loyal to the picture of the patriarch as an ordinary human being as drawn by the pre-Islamic midrash and distanced itself from the Islamic portrayal of predestination, despite its integration of the Islamic texts. As with the major episodes of the forefather's biography, the sibyllic prophecy and his discovery of monotheism, the seemingly inconsequential detail of his nourishment acts as a subconscious indicator of each religion's understanding of the patriarch's personality.

APPENDIX

BT Sotah 11b

R. Avira⁸⁶ expounded: Because of the merit of the righteous women who lived in that generation were the Israelites delivered from Egypt. When they went to draw water, the Holy One, blessed be He, arranged that small fish enter their pitchers, so that they drew half water and half fish. They set two pots on the fire, one for hot water and the other for fish, and carried these to their husbands in the field. They washed them, perfumed them, fed them, gave them to drink and had intercourse with them among the sheepfolds,⁸⁷ as it is said: “For those of you who lie among the sheepfolds etc” [Ps. 68:14]. As the reward for “who lie among the sheepfolds,” the Israelites merited the plundering of the Egyptians, as it is said: “there are wings of a dove sheathed in silver, its pinions in fine gold” [Ps. 68:14].⁸⁸

Once the women had conceived, they returned to their homes. And when the time for them to give birth arrived, they went and gave birth in the field, under the apple tree, as it is said: “Under the apple tree I roused you etc.”⁸⁹ [Song of Songs 8:5]. The Holy One, blessed be He, sent down one from the upper heavens who washed and straightened the limbs [of the babies] in the same manner that this midwife straightens the limbs of a child; as it is said: “And as for your birth, on the day you were born your umbilical cord was not cut, neither were you washed in water to cleanse you”

⁸⁶ Avira was a fourth century CE Palestinian *amora*. *Exodus Rabbah* 1:12 places the entire pericope in the mouth of the more well-known R. Akiva, a Palestinian *tanna* of c. 40–135 CE.

⁸⁷ In other words, at the edges of the fields.

⁸⁸ The exegesis here becomes more intelligible when we understand the verses in their context. Psalms 68:12–15 reads: “[12] The Lord gives a command; the women who bring the news are a great host. [13] The kings and their armies are in headlong flight; housewives are sharing in the spoils; [14] even for those of you who lie among the sheepfolds, there are wings of a dove sheathed in silver, its pinions in fine gold. [15] When Shaddai scattered the kings, it seemed like a snow-storm in Zalmon.”

⁸⁹ Although the Talmud quotes only the first part of the verse, the entire verse is relevant here: “Under the apple tree I roused you; it was there your mother was in labor with you, there she who bore you was in labor with you.”

[Ezek. 16:4]. He also gathered for them two round [loaves/cakes], one of oil and one of honey, as it is said: “And He made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil etc” [Deut. 32:13].

When the Egyptians realized this, they went to kill them but a miracle occurred on their behalf so that they were swallowed up by the ground. So [the Egyptians] brought oxen and ploughed over them, as it is said: “The ploughers ploughed upon my back” [Ps. 129:3]. After they [the Egyptians] departed, they [the babies] broke through [the earth] and sprouted up like the grass of the field, as it is said: “I made you as numerous as the plants of the field” [Ezek. 16:7]. And when [the babies] grew up, they came in flocks to their homes, as it is said: “And you did increase and wax great and came with ornaments upon ornaments” [Ezek. 16:7]—read not “with ornaments [*ba'adi 'adayim*]” but “in flocks [*be'edre 'adarim*]”. When the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself by the Red Sea, they recognized Him first, as it is said: “This is my God and I will praise Him” [Ex. 15:2].

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FABULOUS FIRE-FIGHTING FROGS OF CHALDEA

In both the Islamic and the Jewish traditions, the years following the forefather's emergence from his natal cave and his discovery of God and of monotheism follow a similar general pattern. The child, now somewhat grown, returns home to his father's house where he witnesses first-hand the practice of idolatry. Abraham/Ibrāhīm attempts to turn his family and his people away from this false worship by working as an incompetent and rather subversive idol merchant, a job his father arranges for him. Frustrated by the obstinate insistence of those around him in adhering to idolatry, the patriarch attacks the idols and destroys them. His iconoclastic behavior and tirades against the state-sponsored religion ultimately earn him the notice and wrath of the king who, in this cycle of narratives as in the earlier, sentences the firebrand to death.

In both the Islamic and Jewish traditions, the fire episode that then ensues constitutes perhaps the most famous and most important of the patriarch's early trials. This incident above all others proves beyond a shadow of a doubt Abraham's/Ibrāhīm's special and intimate relationship with his God. Incensed by Ibrāhīm's/Abraham's rebellious behavior, Namrūd/Nimrod orders his people to build an oversized fire and to throw the revolutionary in it. However, a fantastic miracle occurs. Although the fire rages around the forefather, God does not allow it to harm him; instead, the patriarch exits unburned, unscathed, and unperturbed. In some versions, even the murderous king recognizes the divine hand at work and submits to both the patriarch and his God.

While the Islamic and midrashic narratives of the forefather in the fire display numerous points of intertextual contact and sharing, one interesting detail in particular catches the careful reader's attention. In the Muslim versions, a frog appears at Ibrāhīm's fire and attempts to extinguish the flames that threaten him. A superficial glance at this seemingly minor detail would relegate it, along with other minor details, to the realm of Islamic story-telling fancy; it helps make the story more interesting and attractive to its listeners. However, as with

the finger-food motif, a more thorough inspection reveals the frog's greater significance for understanding the interplay between Islam and Judaism as well as for understanding better the different characterizations of their shared forefather.

I. *Fire, Frogs, and Ibrāhīm*

A. *In the Qur'ān*

The Qur'ān remains mostly tight-lipped regarding Ibrāhīm's experience in the fire. *Sūrat al-Anbiyā*² (21:51–71) relates that after much religious trouble-making, Ibrāhīm is brought before his people to be tried for smashing their gods. A mini-disputation between them ensues and Ibrāhīm emerges victorious. Unwilling to concede and desiring to save their gods, the people sentence him to death by incineration. But just as things look their bleakest, Allah commands the fire to go against its own hot nature and not burn His friend, saying, “‘Turn cold, o fire, and give safety to Ibrāhīm’” (v. 69). Subsequent verses then go on to speak of other matters, such as Allah's later rescue of Ibrāhīm and Lūt (Lot) and His delivery of them to the land He had blessed. The fire episode receives no further detailed Qur'ānic consideration, neither in this *sūra* nor at other points.

B. *Post-Qur'ānic Islamic Sources*

The post-Qur'ānic Islamic texts expound upon the sparse words of the Qur'ān, paying special attention to Allah's command to the fire to be “cool and safe” for Ibrāhīm. A number of exegetes point out that the command reached more than just the fire facing Allah's friend. Rather, all fires, all over the world, no matter their source, became cool at that moment.¹ Moreover, on that day, no reptile/lizard

¹ It is unclear what the precise reason for this statement is, whether moralistic, practical or, more likely, a combination of the two. Morally speaking, such behavior demonstrates Fire's submission to Allah's will, thereby presenting an instructive model for human behavior. Practically speaking, with no fire burning anywhere, Namrūd and his people would have been unable to kindle Ibrāhīm's fire in the first place and thus would have been unable to harm him. The reaction of the world's fires to a command meant for a specific one furthermore recalls a pre-Islamic midrash on the splitting of the sea. According to the 3rd century CE *Mekhilta* on *Beshalach* (chapter 4), when God commanded the Red Sea to split apart to allow

had any fire in it, nor did any animal add to Ibrāhīm’s fire. None, that is, save the gecko (وزغ), who inched closer to the fire in order to blow on it and thus strengthen it. The gecko did not long remain the only animal actively interested in the outcome of the fire. While the gecko attempted to thwart Allah’s wishes and increase the heat, a frog jumped forward to help carry out His plan.² According to ‘Abd al-Razzāq, a Laurel-and-Hardy-like scene ensued as the gecko kept blowing on the fire and the frog kept trying to put it out. Al-Qummī and al-Majlisī specify how the amphibian did this: the frog kept dipping itself in water. In recognition of its reprehensible behavior, Muḥammad later renamed the lizard *fuwaysiq* (فُويسق), “little sinful thing,” and commanded the Muslims to kill it wherever they found it.³ Ibn ‘Asākir attributes the punishment to a more divine source. Before this incident, he relates, the gecko ranked as the most beautiful of creatures. In light of its behavior at Ibrāhīm’s fire, Allah cursed it. Additionally, records Ibn ‘Asākir, any Muslim who kills a gecko receives a divine reward.⁴ Some sources record similar behavior on the part of the mule, with a similarly negative result: when the fire of Ibrāhīm was being built, the beasts of burden tried to

the Israelites to escape from slavery in Egypt, all waters the world over—in springs, wells, caves, cups, bowls, barrels, and any other place—obeyed His command and split apart. Even the waters in the depths of the earth and the waters in the heavens split asunder. When the Red Sea closed back up on the Egyptians, all these waters returned to normal as well. See Saul Horovitz and Israel Abraham Rabin, eds. *Mekhilta de-Rabi Yishma’el* [The Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael], 2nd ed., (Jerusalem: Bamberger and Wahrmann, 1960), p. 104. A shorter version of this account appears in the post-Qur’anic *Exodus Rabbah* (8th–9th century CE), 21:6 (For more on the dating of this work, see Appendix C.). Similarly, the 5th century CE *Genesis Rabbah* 53:8 teaches that when Abraham’s wife Sara was finally cured of her sterility and became pregnant, all the sterile women in the world became pregnant along with her.

² ‘Abd al-Razzāq (744–827 CE), 2:24–25; Al-Qummī (d. circa 940 CE), 2:73; Ibn ‘Asākir (1105–1176 CE), *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, 6:185; al-Majlisī (d. 1698 CE), *Bihār*, 12:33. Muqātil, al-Tabarī (quoting Qatāda), al-Tha’labī, and Ibn Kathīr omit the frog. See Muqātil (c. 713–767 CE), 3:613; al-Tabarī (838–923 CE), *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 17:45; al-Tha’labī (d. 1036 CE), *Qisāṣ al-anbiyā’*, 93; Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373 CE), *Tafsīr*, 5:352. Al-Qummī and al-Majlisī note that this fire outage lasted for three days.

³ Al-Tabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 17:45; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 5:352; al-Tha’labī, 93; al-Damīrī (1344–1405 CE), *Hayāt al-hayawān al-kubra* (Cairo: Muṣṭafa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1956), 1:580. Muqātil (3:613) and Ibn ‘Asākir (6:185) likewise record the injunction to kill geckos but do not include Muḥammad’s renaming of them. Lane records similar traditions told of الفويسقة (*al-fuwaysqa*), a mouse or rat, so called because it comes forth from its hole to prey upon people and do mischief in their houses. As with the gecko, tradition relates that it is to be killed. See Lane, ed., *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. “الفويسقة” (v. 1:6, p. 2398).

⁴ 6:185.

prevent their masters' participation either by refusing to carry wood to the pyre or by slowing down appreciably. The mules, however, did not refuse and, in some cases, even proved themselves to be the fastest in bringing the wood over. In recognition of this, Allah "cut" their wombs and made them sterile. So they remain to this day.⁵

The frog, however, came to a far better end. While the gecko, and in some cases the mule, assisted those enemies of Allah plotting against Ibrāhīm, the frog turned herself into a fire-fighter in an attempt to assist Allah Himself. In return for the frog's loyalty, notes 'Abd al-Razzāq, Muḥammad blessed frogs with immunity and forbade his community of believers from killing them.⁶

C. *Frogs?* *Why Frogs?*

Despite the colorfulness of the Islamic motif, an exegetical question arises: whence this notion of firefighting frogs? The Qur'ān makes neither direct nor indirect reference to any such amphibian efforts. Rather, the Qur'ān states quite unambiguously that Allah Himself, and Allah alone, saved Ibrāhīm. Moreover, declaring that the frog helped Allah to save Ibrāhīm is almost tantamount to contending that Allah *needed* her help. What's more, while the lizard-oriented part of the motif seems to provide an etiology for a possible Arab/Muslim custom of killing geckos, the frog-oriented half does not seem to do the same regarding a custom of protecting frogs. The lizard-frog narrative is often followed by accounts demonstrating what appears to have been a well-known Islamic imperative to kill geckos. For example, many a *hadīth* report relates that 'Ā'isha, Muḥammad's favorite wife, kept a spear at the ready in her house. When asked the reason for this odd habit, 'Ā'isha replied that it was for killing geckos for, she quoted from Muḥammad, "When Ibrāhīm was thrown into the fire, all the animals tried to put it out except for the gecko who tried to blow on it [and thus make it bigger]."⁷ Almost never, however, does a favorable *hadīth* about saving frogs follow. In fact, only 'Abd al-Razzāq, of all the sources to relate the frog's righteousness,

⁵ See Ibn 'Asākir, 6:185; Ishāq ibn Bishr (d. 821 CE), 168a; and, al-Kisā'ī (c. 13th cent. CE), 138.

⁶ 'Abd al-Razzāq, 2:25; According to Ibn 'Asākir (6:184), the fire likewise earned a reward; in return for having remained cool, Allah increased the beauty of the fire seventy-fold.

⁷ See, for example, Ibn 'Asākir, 6:185–187, among others.

formulates the frog-motif in etiology form; he alone records that Muslims were forbidden to kill frogs and that this prohibition came about as a direct result of the frog's behavior at Ibrāhīm's fire.

One could posit that the post-Qur'ānic affiliation of the frog with Ibrāhīm's fire evolved from a fairly common accrediting of water-making capabilities to the frog in the pre-modern world. Manabu Waida teaches that ancient societies believed that frogs produced rain by croaking and also generally associated them with water and wetness.⁸ In his compendium of folklore motifs, Stith Thompson records a number of different religious and ethnic traditions that credit the water-bound frog with being a creature that delights in helping man. One interesting African motif attributes the birth of mankind to the mating of a frog and a fire-daughter.⁹ Based on this, one might conjecture that a similar folk-tradition existed among the Arabs/Muslims and that it entered the canonical tradition here, at the scene of a raging fire, precisely when Ibrāhīm needed such water-based aid the most.

However, all this would prove a false lead. None of Thompson's or Waida's motifs ascribes any specific fire-fighting powers to the humble frog nor do the traditions of the ancient societies record frogs croaking with the specific purpose of bringing rain in order to put out a fire. In fact, more often than not, despite affiliating frogs with water, ancient societies associated the frog with principles of evil and death rather than with redemption and life. The Altaic tradition, for example, maintains that the god Ülgen desired to destroy the humans he created after they had been marred by the devil Erlik. He changed his mind, however, when a *frog* proposed that he force mankind to exist under the curse of mortality, a punishment worse than death. In Iranian mythology, a closer relative to the Islamic corpus, the frog appears as a symbol or embodiment of the evil spirit. Inner Asian cosmogonic myths, possibly influenced by Iranian teachings, maintain that frogs, together with lizards, worms, and mice, come out of the hole made in the earth by the Satanic figure.¹⁰

Such amphibian evil clashes with the Islamic picture of the frog as fulfilling Allah's will and acting as a harbinger of *life*. Indeed, the

⁸ Mircea Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1987) s.v. "Frogs and Toads," by Manabu Waida (5:433).

⁹ Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955–58), 6:318–319. The African motif bears Thompson's number (A1221.5).

¹⁰ Ibid., 5:443. As noted in n. 3, Lane records that a mouse or rat, known as

depiction of the frog as a righteous fire-fighter is not the only positive portrayal of the frog in the Islamic tradition. Some of the *fuqahā'* (jurists) teach that the frog became a protected species because she was an underwater neighbor of Allah's when Allah's throne sat above the primordial waters that covered the universe.¹¹ ‘Ikrima, the slave and frequent transmitter of Ibn ‘Abbās, reports that the very voice of the frog constitutes praise of Allah.¹² In a similar vein, Ibn ‘Asākir quotes a *hadīth* in the name of Mughīra ibn Uṭayba proclaiming the frog as the creature who spends the most time in prayer remembering Allah.¹³ *Hadīth* reports from Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Qurṭubī, a Malīkī jurist and expert on *hadīth* from Andalusia (d. 1272),¹⁴ and Anas ibn Mālik, the servant of Muḥammad, tell of a conversation between the frog and Da’ūd (David) the king, composer of the *Zabūr* (Book of Psalms). In a fit of self-promotional boasting, King Da’ūd once declared that no other creature in the world engaged in praising Allah as much as he himself did. A frog then approached him and informed him that she had not stopped praising Allah for the past 70 years. What's more, she notified him, for the past ten days and nights she had been so engaged in that activity that she had stopped for neither food nor drink. Faced with such evidence, Da’ūd retracted his claim.¹⁵

This last report, the conversation between the Israelite regent and the frog, appears also in a pre-Islamic Jewish source, the liturgical *Perek Shira*. Although not strictly a midrashic text but a mystical hymn in which all of creation proclaims the glory of God, this late tannaitic-early amoraic (late second-early third century CE) composition was written in a literary-midrashic framework and preserves tannaitic midrashim.¹⁶ According to *Perek Shira*, at the moment in

الفوسيقة (*al-fuwaysiqā*, little evil thing), comes forth from its hole to prey upon people and do mischief in their houses. See Lane, ed., *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. “الفوسيقة” (v. 1:6, p. 2398).

¹¹ Al-Damīrī, 1:581.

¹² Al-Damīrī, 1:581.

¹³ 5:712. ‘Ikrima's death has been calculated as 723–724 CE.

¹⁴ For more on al-Qurṭubī, see *EI*², s.v. “Al-Kurtubī, Abū ‘Abd Allah,” by R. Arnaldez (5:512–513).

¹⁵ As in al-Damīrī, 1:579–580.

¹⁶ Malachi Beit-Arié, *Perek Shira; Mavo'ot u-Mahadura Bigortit* [Perek Shira; Introduction and Critical Edition] (Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1966), 1:60, 72–73. Beit-Arié maintains that *Perek Shira* constitutes one of the earliest compositions belonging to the early tannaitic mystical (*heikhalot*) literature which Gershom

which King David completed composing the Book of Psalms, a boastful spirit overcame him. Lord of the Universe, he rhetorically declared, is there another creature in the world who sings Your praises more than I do? At that moment, the frog appeared before him and admonished him. David, she said, do not brag so much, for I praise God more than you do. What's more, she added, I accompany every song of praise that I offer up with 3,000 parables. Additionally, continued the frog, I also perform a good deed (lit. *מצוּה*, *mitzvah*) for there is one species of bird who gets his sustenance from the water only; when he is hungry, he eats me and I allow myself to be eaten. What greater deed is there?¹⁷ As in the later Islamic tradition, this pre-Islamic midrashic text attributes to the frog a righteous personality; both praise God night and day, even more than David, the traditionally accepted composer of the ultimate book of praise to God. Moreover, the midrashic frog's *mitzvah*, allowing herself to be eaten periodically by a certain bird, an act which ensures the bird's survival as a species, demonstrates her commitment to assuring that God's world follows His original plan, a trait shared by the frog of Ibrāhīm's fire.

The conjunction between the pre-Islamic midrashic depiction of the virtuousness of the frog and Islam's positive frog portrayal leads us to turn to the midrashic tradition as a possible source for the frog of Ibrāhīm's fire. To be sure, the point of similarity between the two traditions is not merely that both hold the frog in high esteem. Rather, more specifically, both present the frog in conversation with an undeservedly boasting King David, a conversation that does *not* occur in either tradition's scripture. An additional similarity in the frog-portrayals of both the Islamic and midrashic narratives exists as well. In sacrificing herself for the good of the bird, *Perek Shira*'s frog, like Ibrāhīm's, strives to save an innocent life that would otherwise meet an untimely and unwarranted death and, eventually, extinction. Like the Islamic frog at Ibrāhīm's fire, the midrashic frog concerns herself with saving the unfortunate in recognition of God and His plan for the universe.¹⁸ With that, we turn now to the midrashic rendition of Abraham in the fiery furnace of Ur in an effort to better understand the presence of the frog at Ibrāhīm's fire.

Sholem dates to not after the 3rd century CE. Basing himself largely on internal evidence, Beit-Arié suggests that editing of this anonymous hymn may have occurred as early as the end of the tannaitic period (20 BCE–200 CE).

¹⁷ Beit-Arié, 2:22ff.

¹⁸ Like the Islamic tradition, the pre-Islamic Jewish tradition praises the frog in

II. *Fire-Fighting Frogs and Abraham*

A. *The Fiery Furnace of Ur in the Bible*

Unlike the Qur'ān which speaks of Ibrāhīm's experience in Namrūd's pyre, the Bible's biography of Abraham commences only *after* this extra-Scriptural episode is said to have occurred. The Bible makes no reference to Abraham's escape from a fire. As noted in previous chapters, the Biblical account of this first patriarch begins with Abraham as a fully grown, already established monotheist (Genesis 12). By the time he first appears in the book of Genesis, he has already attracted both God's attention and His favor. The first recorded conversation between Abraham and God (12:1–3) begins with God telling him to move from his native land to a land that God will show him. God furthermore promises to bless Abraham, make of him a great nation, make his name great, bless those who bless him, and curse those who curse him. Shortly thereafter God promises the land of Canaan to Abraham as an inheritance (12:7). Not once, however, does the text explain how such a close relationship between the man and the Deity came to be. Rather, from the start, the Bible presents Abraham as a man already in conversation with the Divine.

B. *The Fiery Furnace of Ur in the Midrash*

Though the Bible includes no mention whatsoever of the patriarch's stint in a fiery furnace, the pre-Islamic midrash nonetheless presents the episode as a given. The early midrashic texts provide few details, however. Most of the canonical accounts limit themselves to stating only that Nimrod threw Abraham into the fiery furnace as punishment for Abraham's loyalty to God and that God Himself saved His servant from the flames.¹⁹ Some versions wax only a little more eloquent,

additional ways as well. Both *Genesis Rabbah* (10:7) and *Leviticus Rabbah* (400–500 CE) (22:3) single out the frog as one of the few animals whom God utilizes in order to accomplish His bidding. *Exodus Rabbah* (10:1) further emphasizes the frog's role, noting the Israelites would never have been able to rid themselves of the Egyptians without the frog. See *Leviticus Rabbah* in *Midrash Rabbah ha-Mevo'ar* (Jerusalem: Mekhon ha-Midrash ha-Mevo'ar, 5752 [1991/2], v. 3, *Sefer Vayikra*; and *Exodus Rabbah* in *Midrash Rabbah ha-Mevo'ar*, v. 2.

¹⁹ *BT Pesahim* 118a; *BT Erwin* 53a; *Genesis Rabbah*, 44:13; *Song of Songs Rabbah*

reporting that when Abraham was thrown into the fiery furnace, the archangel Gabriel begged God to allow him to descend to earth and save the patriarch's life. God rejected Gabriel's offer saying, "I am unique in My world, and he is unique in his. It is preferable that He Who is unique should save him who is unique."²⁰

The post-Qur'ānic midrashic sources elaborate upon the pre-Islamic accounts while remaining loyal to the theme of God as the sole savior at the fiery furnace.²¹ In these later texts, Abraham the monotheist was hauled before Nimrod and sentenced to death specifically for his having destroyed the idol house. Despite the fire raging around the bound patriarch, a fire to which people had been contributing

(500–640 CE), 1:12. These earlier accounts are echoed in the 5th century CE *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber edition), 1:58.

Non-canonical midrashic works give different reasons for the fire. The 1st century CE Pseudo-Philo and, later, the 13th century *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* report that Abraham was thrown into the fire for refusing to participate in the building of the tower of Babel, from which his people intended to launch a fight against God. Interestingly, the 2nd-1st century BCE *Book of Jubilees* maintains that Abraham was not thrown into a fire but that he set a fire which burned down the idol-house. In order to escape the understandably ensuing ire of the Chaldeans and their king, he then left town. This formulation reappears in *Palaea Historica* (not after the 9th century CE). The 2nd century CE *Apocalypse of Abraham* (8:1–6) reports that God—not Abraham—set the fire, destroying both Abraham's father's house and the attached idol workshop. Fire also plays a role in Abraham's earlier discovery of God when a miniature idol accidentally falls into the kitchen fire and burns. This prompts Abraham to consider more closely the falsity of idol-worship and sparks a debate between the future patriarch and his father (5:1–7:12). See James, ed., *The Biblical Antiquities of Philo*, 85–86; *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, ch. 29; *The Book of Jubilees*, v. 2, 12:12–13; Flusser, "Palaea Historica," 53; and, *The Apocalypse of Abraham* ch. 2–7.

²⁰ *BT Pesahim* 118a. In a departure from the other midrashic accounts, *Genesis Rabbah* 44:13 and *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:12 substitute Michael for Gabriel. This may be due to the depiction of Michael as the angelic representative and guardian of Israel, as portrayed in Dan. 12:1. Most midrashic accounts attribute the act to Gabriel.

In an interesting twist, *Genesis Rabbah* 34:9 hints that Abraham may actually have burned. According to Gen. 8:20, after Noah, Abraham's forefather, survived the flood and reached land, he offered up a sacrifice to God. Commenting on the wording of Gen. 8:21 ("The Lord smelled the pleasing odor"), the midrashist explains that the scent emanated not from Noah's offering but from a later sacrifice, "He [God] smelled the scent of Abraham our father going up from the fiery furnace." In other words, it appears that God first smelled Abraham's flesh burning in the fire and only then sprung into action. One is left to understand that He either plucked a somewhat singed but still alive Abraham from the fire or restored his life to him.

²¹ On God Himself saving Abraham: *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (PRE, 8th century CE), chapter 26; *Midrash ha-Gadol*, Gen. 11:28; *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, chapter 29; *Deuteronomy Rabbah* (450–800 CE), 29, in *Midrash Rabbah ha-Mevo'ar* (Jerusalem: Mekhon ha-Midrash ha-Mevo'ar, 5743 [1982/3]), v. 5, *Sefer Devarim; Sefer ha-Yashar*, 40–43. On Gabriel begging to save him in the post-Qur'ānic texts: *Jerahmeel* 34:12–13.

wood for days, God caused him to emerge unharmed.²² Although the flames never disappeared, nor even dissipated, only the fetters binding Abraham burned, miraculously allowing him freedom of movement without any injury whatsoever.²³ In contrast to the Islamic texts, nowhere in the post-Qur'anic midrashic accounts of Abraham's fire do frogs appear, neither as volunteer fire-fighters nor even in passing. Even those later midrashic texts that usually display a large measure of Islamic influence, such as *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* and *Sefer ha-Yashar*, exclude any such reference to a frog or any other savior save God.²⁴ In their silence vis-a-vis animal assistance, the post-Qur'anic midrashic accounts echo the sentiments of the pre-Islamic narratives.

III. *Frogs and the Egyptian Furnaces*

Though the midrashic Abraham saga excludes amphibian participation in extinguishing Abraham's fire, a different pre-Islamic midrashic

²² *PRE*, p. 26, 48; *MG*, 11:28; *Jerahmeel*, 32:3–6, 34:1–13; One should note that *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* mentions only Abraham's unwillingness to worship Nimrod's idol as the immediate cause for the fire. See *Targum Yonatan ben Uzziel 'al ha-Torah*, Gen. 11:28, 4:1; *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, 29; *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* (c. 600–800 CE) attributes Abraham's fiery punishment to the polemic between Nimrod and the patriarch (chapter 7).

²³ *Jerahmeel*, 64:5; *Sefer ha-Yashar*, 40, 42; *Midrash ha-Gadol* (Gen. 11:28) reports that Abraham was bound and thrown into the fire but that neither flame nor coal touched his body. The fetters do not appear.

²⁴ In his footnotes to *Perek Shira*, *Beit-Arié* (2:26, n. 10) points out that the fire-fighting frog does appear in one interesting post-Qur'anic "Jewish" source. This occurs in the *Iggeret Ba'alei Ḥayyim* (II, 10:76) of Kalonymous ben Kalonymous (Provence, 1286–1328). Regarding the frog, Kalonymous writes, "The frog receives respect from the Children of Israel for two kindnesses which he performed for them. The first was when Nimrod ben Cush threw Abraham, the friend of the Merciful, into the fire of the Chaldees/Chaldeans, he [the frog] brought water in his mouth and spit it out on the fire in order to extinguish it. The other instance was in the days of Moses ben Amram, the prophet of truth, when he [the frog] helped him to defeat Pharaoh and his people." See Kalonymous ben Kalonymous, *Iggeret Ba'alei Ḥayyim*, ed. Y. Toporovsky (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1949). *Beit-Arié* notes that the first "kindness" of the frogs is not to be found in any previous midrashic sources, as has been shown above. He notes further that Kalonymous' work is not midrashic in nature but is a Hebrew translation, with some *darshanic* additions that Kalonymous calls "light changes," of the 21st treatise of the Arabic Muslim *Encyclopedia of the Sincere Brethren* (*Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*). As such, Kalonymous' familiarity with the motif of Abraham's frog and its appearance in his text points to Islamic influence in the realm of popular culture rather than in the realm of the more scholarly midrash. One ought not to consider this source as depicting "Jewish" themes.

narrative cycle credits frogs with precisely such fire-fighting capabilities. Perhaps not surprisingly, we find our fabulous frogs in an early midrashic pericope not on Abraham but on the Israelite experience in Egypt during the lifetime of Moses. Like the frog of the Ibrāhīm narratives, here too frogs come to the rescue of fire-embattled monotheists, squelching the menacing flames that threaten them. And, just as the Islamic texts laud Ibrāhīm’s frog for her efforts, setting her up in opposition to the vilified lizard, so too the midrashic frogs receive rewards in exchange for their trouble. Given the pattern established in the finger-food motif, it is not far-fetched to conjecture that this early midrashic idea of the frog that fights fires in God’s name prompted the later Islamic inclusion of a similarly concerned frog at Ibrāhīm’s Chaldean pyre.

The tradition in question, *BT Pesahim* 53b, records the teaching of Theodosius of Rome regarding the behavior of three of Abraham’s descendants during the Babylonian exile which began with King Nebuchadnezzar’s sack of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. According to the Book of Daniel (3:1–29), three exiles-turned-court-Israelites—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—disobeyed a royal decree to bow down to a golden idol that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had made. Infuriated by their behavior, Nebuchadnezzar threw them into a fiery furnace, from which they eventually escaped unscathed, thanks to divine intervention. Noting their dangerous refusal to submit to the king’s authority and his threats, Theodosius, the spiritual leader of the Roman Jewish community of the late 1st century CE,²⁵ posed the following question: what did Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah see that led them to choose martyrdom in the fiery furnace over obedience to the king? As Theodosius undoubtedly understood, Jewish law decrees that one may not martyr oneself unless certain factors exist, factors which did *not* come into play in the Daniel incident. Thus, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah should have capitulated to the king’s demand to bow.²⁶ Having raised the problem Theodosius

²⁵ For more on Theodosius, see *EJ*, s.v. “Theodosius of Rome” by Daniel Sperber (15:1102).

²⁶ Based on the verse “And you should *live* by them [God’s laws]” (Lev. 18:5), Jewish law rules that one must martyr oneself rather than violate Jewish law in three cases: if one is commanded to bow down before idols or be killed, to kill another person or be killed, or to commit a prohibited sexual act or be killed. The rabbis teach that one must also allow oneself to be killed if one is commanded to violate *any* of the commandments in public specifically because one is a Jew or in

also supplies the answer: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah extrapolated an a fortiori argument from the frogs in Egypt who sanctified God's name through martyrdom though, as animals, they are not commanded to do so. They noted that Scripture alludes to this amphibian martyrdom in Exodus 7:28 where Moses describes to Pharaoh the horror that will befall his people once the plague of the frogs begins: "... and the river shall bring forth frogs in swarms, and these will go up and come into your house, and into your bed chamber, and upon your bed, and into the house of your servants, and upon your people, and into your ovens, and into your kneading troughs (מִשְׁאָרֹת, *mish'arot*)."²⁷ When, asks Theodosius in his reconstruction of the three Israelites' logic, are ovens found specifically next to kneading troughs, as indicated in the verse? The two are placed side by side, he replies, only when the ovens are heated, awaiting the dough from the kneading troughs. According to Theodosius, the word order of the verse ["ovens"—"kneading troughs"] indicates that the frogs threw themselves into the already *hot* furnaces of the Egyptian women. In other words, intent on fulfilling God's will, the frogs gave no thought to their own safety. Now, reasoned Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah according to Theodosius' reading, frogs are not commanded to martyr themselves in order to sanctify God's name and yet they did so. We, as human beings, *are* commanded to sanctify the Lord's name, even if doing so means death. Therefore, if one who is not commanded to do so risked his life, certainly one who *IS* commanded ought to sacrifice himself to sanctify God's name.²⁷

the case of government persecutions of Judaism. See *BT Sanhedrin* 74a in Chapter Appendix. In his commentary on the *Pesahim* passage, the 11th century R. Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi) suggests that the case of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah was *not* one of the cases in which one is required to choose martyrdom. *Tosafot*, a 12th–14th century CE Talmudic commentary, explains why: some understood that the statue before which Nebuchadnezzar commanded people to bow was not an idol but an "*andarta*"—a bust of himself that he erected for self-aggrandizement, *not* idolatry. Thus, bowing before it would *not* have constituted a violation of Jewish law. Rashi therefore reads Theodosius as teaching that Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah had no obligation to give up their lives but did so supererogatorily, having learned from the frogs of Egypt who earlier had chosen supererogatory martyrdom.

²⁷ *BT Sanhedrin* 93a mentions yet another Nebuchadnezzarian fire into which three Israelites are thrown, although with less positive results. Commenting on Jeremiah 29:22 ("The Lord should make you like Zedekiah and like Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire"), the Talmud relates that Nebuchadnezzar sentenced Zedekiah and Ahab to a fiery furnace in order to test their claim that they were prophets like Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. When they protested that there was

The Babylonian Talmud does not stand alone in presenting the virtuous behavior of the frogs in Egypt as models for the Babylonian captives. This link between the frogs of the Egyptian plague and the later Israelite descendants remained active in later midrashic texts as well. The 10th century CE *Exodus Rabbah* details exactly how the amphibious martyrdom occurred. From this small account, we learn that the rabbis understood that the cooking fires of the Egyptians posed a particularly worrisome threat to the enslaved Israelites. The fires allowed the Egyptians to cook, thereby keeping themselves strong enough to continue harassing their Israelite slaves. The frogs came up with a plan to thwart this cycle. As *Exodus Rabbah* 10:2.4 relates, when an Egyptian woman would knead dough and light the oven, the frogs would climb into the dough, enter the lit ovens, cool them off,²⁸ and stick to the dough. Echoing *BT Sanhedrin*, *Exodus Rabbah* explains that the verse's placement of the kneading troughs next to the ovens indicates that the ovens were lit and that dough, the product of kneading troughs, sticks to ovens only when they are lit and heated. According to *Exodus Rabbah*, this incident served as a guide for Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The Israelite captives learned to allow themselves to be thrown into Nebuchadnezzar's furnace from the behavior of the frogs who selflessly threw themselves into the ovens and thereby cooled them off.

no precedent for the survival of only two men in a fire, since the earlier trial was conducted with three, Nebuchadnezzar allowed them to choose a third man to join them. They chose Joshua the High Priest, hoping that Joshua's righteousness would save them all. Their plan failed. Ahab and Zedekiah burned to death and their evil presence affected Joshua, instead of the other way around. While Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (all three of whom were righteous) emerged from the fire completely unscathed, Joshua's clothes were singed.

Zakovitch brings to light an alternate adapted early midrashic version of the Daniel fire. It concerns not Abraham but the judge Ya'ir, a character mentioned almost in passing in Judges 10:3–5. Chapter 38 of Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* (1st century CE) elaborates upon the terse verses in Judges, relating that Ya'ir erected an altar to the false god Baal and commanded the people of Israel to worship it. When seven men refused, Ya'ir ordered them thrown into the fire. God saved the seven loyalists from incineration while Ya'ir himself, along with many of his followers, found death in that very fire. See Yair Zakovitch, "Ma'a'aseh Ya'ir ve-ha-Kamin," [The Story of Ya'ir and the Fiery Furnace], in *Ha-Miqra be-Re'i Mefarshav* [The Bible in the Light of Its Interpreters], ed. Sara Japhet (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994), 141–156.

²⁸ In what is perhaps a reference to amphibian cold-bloodedness, Rabbi David Luria (1798–1855 CE) explains that the frogs "cooled off" the furnaces due to the "coolness" that is in their nature. Shinan, ed., *Shemot Rabbah* [Exodus Rabbah], 10:2.4.

Midrash Tehillim retells Theodosius' narrative as well, though *Tehillim* adds a second interpretation of the captives' understanding of the earlier Egyptian incident.²⁹ According to this alternate midrashic reading, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah noted that the frogs who threw themselves into the ovens in Ex. 7:28 were miraculously revivified as a reward for their actions. In Exodus 8:7, Moses informs Pharaoh that at the plague's end, the frogs will retreat from him, his courtiers, and his people and will remain only in the Nile itself. Exodus 8:9 then records that God had done as Moses had predicted; the frogs who had been in “the houses, the courts, and the fields” of the Egyptians died, ending the second plague.³⁰ Interestingly, those frogs who had thrown themselves into the furnaces, as per God's specific command in Exodus 7:28, are not mentioned as having “retreated” nor, more significantly, as having died. *Tehillim* understands this omission to indicate that the Nile frogs that remained were those who had originally thrown themselves into the Egyptian furnaces. Because they sacrificed themselves in sanctification of God's name in an extremely valiant manner, God permitted them to arise from the ovens alive and enter the Nile, where they remained safe. Says *Tehillim*, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah saw this and understood that if frogs, who are not commanded to sanctify God's name, received the reward of life, they, the children of God's righteous and loyal followers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, would receive such a reward for their actions as well.

IV. *Intertextual Movement and Abraham's Fire*

A. *Islamic-Jewish Intertextuality*

Despite these compelling similarities between the Islamic and midrashic frogs, we are still left with the question of *how* and *why* a midrashic narrative about the frogs of the Egyptian plagues would morph into an Islamic account of a frog at the fire of Ibrāhīm. Aside from the

²⁹ *Midrash Tehillim ha-Mekhuneh Sokher Tov*, ed. Shelomo Buber, (Vilna, 1891; reprint, New York: Om Publishers, 1948), 28:2. On the dating of this work, see Appendix C.

³⁰ The plague continued to afflict the Egyptians even after its “official” end. According to Exodus 8:10, the carcasses of the dead frogs piled up in heaps and began to rot, causing the entire country to stink.

helpfulness of the frogs in situations of fire in both cases, little connects the second Biblical Egyptian plague to Ibrāhīm's Chaldean troubles. The two incidents do not occur during the same historical period, in the same geographic area, or even under the same conditions; while the Chaldeans construct their fire specifically in order to burn Ibrāhīm, the Egyptians have no intent other than simple food preparation when they light their much smaller ovens. Additionally, in Ibrāhīm's case the frog attempts to put out the fire from the outside, by spraying water on it, while the Egyptian frogs try to extinguish it by throwing themselves inside in, thereby both smothering the flames and temporarily ruining the oven.

Indeed, the Islamic tradition, like the midrashic, does not make an outright connection between the Egyptian and Chaldean frog appearances. The Qur'ān and the exegetical material do include frogs among the traditional nine *ayāt* (signs) presented by Mūsā before Fir'awn as proof of Allah's power. However, neither the Qur'ān nor much of the extra-Scriptural corpus presents the episode in great detail.³¹ Of all those sources included in this study, the only particulars regarding this sign appear in al-Tabarī's exegetical opus and al-Tha'labī's *Qisās*. Al-Tabarī cites tradition after tradition explaining the severity of daily life inhabited by an overabundance of frogs. The small green creatures infested the Egyptians' beds, cabinets, containers, food, drinking water, even their beards; a man would try to eat and a frog would jump into his mouth.³² Al-Tha'labī's account

³¹ Q 17:101 relates, "We gave Moses nine clear signs; so ask the children of Israel. When (Moses) came to them the Pharaoh said: I think, O Moses, you have been deluded." Q 7:133 enumerates five of these signs: "So We let loose on them floods and locusts, and vermin, frogs and blood—how many different signs. But still they remained arrogant, for they were a people full of sin." Drought and "diminution of fruits" (Q 7:130), the rod which turned into a snake (Q 20:17–21, 26:32), and Mūsā's hand which first turned white and then returned to normal (Q 26:33) traditionally make up the remaining four. The Bible lists 10 plagues: blood, frogs, lice, pestilence, cattle disease, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, slaying of the first-born (Ex. 7:14–12:30). Only some of these appear on the Qur'ān's list. Mūsā's rod (Ex. 4:1–5, 7:8–13) and hand (Ex. 4:6–7) are not included among the Biblical plagues. Interestingly, both Psalms 105:28–36 and Josephus' *Antiquities* (II:14) mention only 9 plagues; however, their lists differ both from each other and from the Qur'ān. Josef Horovitz discusses various occurrences of the number nine in the Qur'ān in his *Koranische Untersuchungen*, 20. For more on the "plagues" as "ayāt" (signs), see *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2004), s.v. "Plagues," by Shari L. Lowin (4:105–106).

³² Jāmī' *al-bayān*, 9:34–40.

recalls the aforementioned midrashic exegesis of *BT Pesahim* 53b. Al-Tha'labī relates in the name of Ibn 'Abbās that frogs used to be land-bound animals. When Allah sent the frogs as signs to Fir'awn, they proved so obedient to His will that they threw themselves into the cooking pots and into the ovens. In reward for their obedience, Allah gave them the coolness of water and they became amphibians.³³ Interestingly, al-Ṭabarī similarly quotes Ibn 'Abbās' claim that the frogs somehow extinguished the Egyptian fires.³⁴ In the overwhelming majority of the extra-Scriptural sources, however, the frogs appear simply as one of the nine miraculous signs that occurred in Egypt and which Fir'awn, in his evilness, ignored, thereby bringing upon himself and his people the wrath of Allah.³⁵ And none, not even the detail-oriented al-Ṭabari nor the colorful al-Tha'labī, here makes reference to Namrūd's earlier fire and the appearance of the frog there.

One possible answer to this *how* and *why* conundrum takes into account the close association of Judaism and Islam throughout certain periods of history. Given the close state of affairs that existed between the two religious traditions and cultures, it is not impossible that the Islamic sources adopted two separate midrashic narratives concerning martyrs in fires (Egyptian frogs alone and Abraham's fire alone) and combined them into one unified and more detailed narrative (frogs *with* Ibrāhīm). Indeed, more than one scholar has noted that Islam sees biblical characters through a midrashic lens but that, in practice, the Islamic narratives do not always adhere to the midrashic text as it originally appears, either purposely or accidentally.

In the purely midrashic realm, Kugel terms such a movement of themes from text to text a "transfer of affects," the process whereby a particular motif, generated to explain a particular text or narrative, comes to be understood as an explanation for some other text or narrative. Kugel notes that sometimes the motif becomes utterly detached from its original home, so that one is no longer aware of what that home was.³⁶ Regarding the fire-fighting frogs in Islam,

³³ Al-Tha'labī, 235.

³⁴ *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 9:36. Both al-Tha'labī and Ibn 'Abbās are famous for their inclusion of *isrā'īliyyāt* material; one should note that much of the material attributed to Ibn 'Abbās became associated with his name only after his death.

³⁵ Muqātil, 2:553; al-Ṭabari, *Ta'rikh*, 1:483, 485 (1/416–417, 418–419); idem, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 15:171–4; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 5:124–126; Ibn Kathīr, *Qisās al-anbiyā'*, ed. Dr. S. Jamilī (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1993), 326–327; Ibn 'Asākir, 61:68–74; al-Kisā'i, 315; al-Tha'labī, 230–238.

³⁶ Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 120. See also the Introduction, above.

such a “transfer of affects” appears to have occurred but across communal rather than across intra-midrashic lines. It seems that the Islamic tradition detached the frog motif from its original home as an exegetical statement on a verse in Exodus which speaks of fires in the context of the plague of frogs and reattached it to the story of Ibrāhīm’s fire. In so doing, the original home of the frog-motif, the Biblical plague account, became blurred and elusive.

B. *The Fire of Daniel*

While this theory is seductive and convincing on some levels, a more compelling, text-based explanation of the motif’s travels exists. This explanation points to the account of a fiery furnace of yet *another* biblical book as the mediating text between Abraham and Egypt, thereby providing the frog motif with a more concrete pathway between Judaism and Islam. The need to look to this additional pericope stems from a puzzle of both the language and veracity in some important and slightly later verses on Abraham in Genesis 15.

In Genesis 15, after Abraham has moved to Canaan and undergone a number of adventures, God appears to Abraham in a dream with the promise of progeny and land. He seals His promises to Abraham, saying, “I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldees (אָרֶן קָשְׁדִים, *Ur Kasdim*) to assign this land to you as a possession” (15:7). A factual problem should immediately strike the observant reader of the Bible: God did not take Abraham out of Ur! Genesis 11:31 records that Abraham’s father Teraḥ was the one responsible for the family’s exodus from Chaldea, noting, “Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldees for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran,³⁷ they settled there.” According to the Bible, God Himself played no role in their move. Even God’s *subsequent* missive to Abraham in Gen. 12:1 to “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you,”³⁸ does not solve the problem. The Bible does not assign a specific

³⁷ In Hebrew, the name of Terah’s son and the name of the country are not the same. The name of the place is חָרָן (Haran) while Terah’s son is הָרָן (Haran).

³⁸ לְקַח מְאַרְצָךְ וּמִמּוֹלְדָתְךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ” (lekh-lekha me-artsekhā u-mi-moladetekha u-mi-beit avikhā). The Hebrew uses three separate terms (*erets*, *moledet*, *beit av*) translated

place-name, Ur or any other, to either of the appositive terms—native land, father's house—God uses to indicate the place from which He commands Abraham to travel. Genesis 11:31 would indicate Haran as the location of the departure. Indeed, an earlier verse appears to rule out Ur specifically as Abraham's birthplace and "native land." Genesis 11:28 relates that Haran, the third of Terah's sons, died during the lifetime of his father "in his native land, Ur of the Chaldees." In listing Ur as Haran's birthplace specifically, the Bible suggests that Haran and Haran alone was born there. Abram and Nahor, Terah's older two children, appear to have been born elsewhere.³⁹ With this in mind one cannot assume that when God commanded Abraham to leave his native land, He was speaking definitively of Ur. Rather, one ought to understand that He intended some other, unnamed land, a reference which Abraham understood but which remains unclear and ambiguous to later readers.

If God did not extricate Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees in Genesis 12:1, how can one understand God's claim in Genesis 15:7 to have done so? The key to understanding these verses lies in reading the "Ur of the Chaldees" in Gen. 15:7 not as the name of the city but as an *event* that occurred in Chaldea, much as the Boston Tea Party is not the name of the city but an event (Tea Party) that occurred in Boston. What was the Chaldean event from which God extracted Abraham? The word Ur (ער) provides the first clue for, as a general noun, the term denotes "fire."⁴⁰ One may thus under-

here as two ("native land" and "father's house"). According to Orlinsky in his notes on the new JPS translation of the Bible, Gen. 12:1 presents a classic case of *hendiadys*, a figure of speech in which two nouns connected by "and" are used instead of one noun or a noun and an adjective. The more usual manner of expressing "native land" in Biblical Hebrew appears in Gen. 11:28, "בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹלַדְתָּה" (*be-erets moladeta*, the land of his birth). See Harry M. Orlinsky, ed., *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969), 85.

³⁹ Nachmanides (13th century CE) supports this reading of the verses in his commentary to Genesis 11:28. Terah's two older sons, he maintains, were born in Haran, the home country of the children of Shem from whom they descend. Chaldea, he points out, was the home of the children of Ham. At some point, Terah moved his family across the river from Haran to Chaldea, where his youngest son, Haran, was born. After Haran's death, the family moved back home to the land of Haran.

⁴⁰ Ezekiel uses the word with this explicit meaning. In Ezek. 5:1, God instructs Ezekiel to shave off his beard and his hair and then divide the hair into three parts. "When the days of the siege are completed," God then directs him, "burn a third part in the fire (ער, *ur*) in the city, take a third and strike it with the sword all around the city, and scatter a third to the wind and unsheathe a sword after them" (5:2). Similarly, the word appears with this meaning in *BT Baba Batra* 10a ("Fire,

stand, as the early rabbis did, that God brought Abraham out of the *fire* of the Chaldeans, not from a city called Ur Kasdim.⁴¹ And, as the early midrashic sources add, since we know that Abraham was the first monotheist after the flood, he must have been thrown into the fire on account of his refusal to submit to the idolatrous religion of his people and his king, Nimrod.⁴²

Understanding *Ur Kasdim* as a Chaldean fire into which Abraham was thrown as punishment for his religious views relies equally and simultaneously on yet another fiery Biblical narrative, Daniel 3. This account, to which reference was made earlier,⁴³ demonstrates a biblically established Chaldean tendency to throw monotheists into fires. Moreover, it simultaneously provides the midrashic Abraham account with the lion's share of its details. Daniel 3 relates that when the Judean captives, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's idol, "certain **Chaldeans** came forward to slander the Jews" (v. 8) and demanded that the Babylonian king burn them in a fiery furnace, נָרָה (nura).⁴⁴ Nebuchadnezzar heated the furnace up to seven times its usual heat, ordered the three Israelites bound, and then commanded his officers to throw them into the fire. God, however, did not permit His loyal servants to come to harm. When he peered inside the furnace for a status check, the king found the men walking around, accompanied by an angel, all of them unbound and unharmed. In response to Nebuchadnezzar's

ur, is stronger than iron for it melts it"). See Chapter Two, n. 15 and the chapter's appendix. The midrash later uses the word *ur* this way during Abraham's polemics with Nimrod in *Genesis Rabbah* 38:13 ("I worship fire, *ur*, and I will throw you in it"). See Chapter Four's appendix. Isaac Heinemann sees this as but one example of what he terms "etymological midrashim." See his *Darkhei ha-Aggadah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1949), 18.

⁴¹ In translating the verse on Haran's death in *Ur Kasdim*, the 1st–2nd century CE Aramaic *Targum Neophyti* displays a similar understanding, reading Ur Kasdim as an event rather than as the name of the city: "And Haran died during the lifetime of his father, Terah, in the land of his birth in the fiery oven of the Chaldeans (בְּאָתָן נָרָהּ דְּכַשְׂדָאֵי, *be-atun nurhon de-kasda'ei*)." See *Neophyti I*, Gen. 11:28. Note that in Hebrew orthography, "Chaldees" and "Chaldeans" both appear as כָּשָׂדִים. See also n. 65.

⁴² *BT Pesahim* 118a; *Genesis Rabbah*, 44:13; *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:12 and 8:8; *Targum Yonatan ben Uzziel* (7th–8th century CE), Gen. 11:28.

⁴³ See above, p. 186.

⁴⁴ Notice the auditory similarity between the Hebrew *ur* and the Aramaic *nura*. Hebrew also has the root נֵר (ner) meaning fire, or light, from which the word נֵר (ner), lamp/candle, derives. See Brown, Driver and Briggs eds., *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 632.

order to exit the fire, the three simply walked straight through the flames to him, emerging unscathed.

The midrashic narrative of Abraham's fire echoes a number of the elements recounted here. Like Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, Abraham refused to submit to the ruler's idols and religion; both Nebuchadnezzar and Nimrod lit mighty fires as punishment for this perceived rebellion. As God had prevented harm from coming to his three descendants, so too God prevented harm from coming to Abraham; despite the fiery surroundings, the Biblical and midrashic heroes all emerged unscathed.⁴⁵ Even the midrashic readings of the place names involved in both accounts recall one another. Daniel 3 takes place in Babel's בְּקָעָה דָּרָא (bik'at dura). Generally, this is translated as the "plain of Dura," leaving the word Dura as a proper noun. However, the Codex Venetus of the Septuagint translates Dura as "bonfire."⁴⁶ Thus, in the early rabbinic mind Abraham's "fire of Kasdim," *Ur Kasdim*, parallels Daniel's *bik'at dura bi-medinat Bavel*, "the plains of the bonfire in the city of Babel."

The pre-Islamic midrashic sources themselves link the midrashic episode of Abraham with the biblical episode in Daniel 3. *BT Pesahim* 118a, *Genesis Rabbah* 44:13 (c. 5th century CE), and *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:12 and 8:8–10 (500–640 CE) relate that when Nimrod threw Abraham into the fiery furnace of Chaldea, God Himself descended from heaven to save the patriarch from incineration. The midrashic texts quote God's declaration in Genesis 15:7, "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur" as proof of this fact. However, they continue, when Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah needed to be rescued from their Chaldean furnace, God allowed an archangel to

⁴⁵ In *I Enoch*, a pseudepigraphal composition dating to 2nd century BCE–1st century CE Judea, Enoch witnesses a similar experience: "(2) And I saw the sons of the holy angels walking upon flames of fire; their garments were white—and their overcoats—and the light of their faces was like snow. (3) Then I fell upon my face before the Lord of the spirits and the angel Michael, one of the archangels, seizing me by right hand and lifting me up, led me out into all the secrets of mercy." See *I Enoch*, trans. E. Isaac, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1983), v. 1, 71:1–3. A similar description appears also in *III Enoch* (final redaction date of 5th–6th century CE), trans. P. Alexander, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1983), v. 1, 36:2.

⁴⁶ Yair Zakovitch, "The Exodus from Ur of the Chaldeans: A Chapter in Literary Archaeology," in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch Levine*, eds. Robert Chazan, William Hallo, and Lawrence Schiffman (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 437. In another interesting twist, Zakovitch notes that the 10th

descend and save them.⁴⁷ This fact, they note, appears in Daniel itself. Daniel 3:25 records that though three men were thrown into the fire, Nebuchadnezzar spotted a fourth, who “looks like a divine being,” walking around inside the furnace with them. Three verses later at Nebuchadnezzar’s capitulation to the Israelite God, the Babylonian king declares, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, *who sent His angel to save His servants.*”⁴⁸

Genesis Rabbah 34:9 similarly links the midrashic Abraham fire to the Biblical Daniel account, although the jumping off point for this midrash differs than for those mentioned above. *Genesis Rabbah* 34:9 presents a rereading of Gen. 8:21, in which God smells the pleasing odor of the sacrifices Noah offers up to Him after surviving the devastation of the flood and landing on terra firma. Although the Biblical text clearly states that odors derive from Noah’s offerings, *Genesis Rabbah* maintains that the odor issued from a more complex sacrifice. Says *Genesis Rabbah* 34:9, the pleasing odor He smelled arose from Abraham in the fiery furnace *and* from Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah in their fiery furnace.⁴⁹

century Spanish lexicographer of Hebrew, Ibn Saruk, translates Ur as a plain, just like *bik'a*. Ibn Saruk draws textual support from Neh. 9:7 and Isa. 24:15. Ibn Saruk’s translation does not appear to be the most commonly accepted.

⁴⁷ *BT Pesahim* 118a maintains that the angel Gabriel asked God’s permission to descend and save the forefather but his request was denied. In return for his volunteerism, God allowed him to rescue Abraham’s descendants. The aforementioned accounts in *Genesis Rabbah* and *Song of Songs Rabbah* initially record some disagreement as to the identity of Abraham’s rescuer, God or the angel Michael. Eventually, the rabbis agree that Ex. 15:7 proves God to be the deliverer. Michael, they explain, delivered Abraham’s progeny. Michael’s role as one who saves people from fire may stem from a rabbinic tradition that understands him to be the “patron angel” of snow. Gabriel, on the other hand, appears as the “patron angel” of fire. See *Numbers Rabbah* (11th–13th century), 12:8, *Deuteronomy Rabbah* (450–800 CE) 5:122 and *Song of Songs Rabbah* 3:24. This tradition may either underlie or have been influenced by *I Enoch*’s report in which Michael led him out of a fire. *BT Pesahim* 118a identifies a different angel as the patron of cold elements falling from the sky. When Yarkumo, the angel of hail, saw that Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were going to be thrown into a raging fire, he asked God to allow him to descend and mitigate the heat of the flames. Gabriel felt this would be too “easy” and convinced God that if he, the angel of fire, cooled down the flames, the miracle would be even greater. *Midrash Tanhuma* (5th century CE) identifies the volunteering angels as the anonymous *מלאכי השרת* (*malakhei ha-sharet*), ministering angels. See *Midrash Tanhuma*, *lekh lekha*: b.

⁴⁸ These are Babylonian names for Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah as recorded in Dan. 1:6. (Emphasis mine).

⁴⁹ As noted above, n. 20, one can read this midrash as indicating that Abraham, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah all burned, or were at least singed, in their fires.

The Bible scholar Geza Vermes maintains that the midrashic association between Abraham and Daniel's companions goes beyond the exegetical to the homiletical. Both accounts, he insists, carry the added doctrinal purpose of exalting the salvific value of faith. Although their beliefs were what placed them in harm's way in the first place, without their pure and true faith in God neither Abraham nor his descendants would have survived their blazing infernos. In both cases, only their loyalty to their convictions and to God saved them. Vermes maintains that the homiletical similarity results from the imprint of the earlier biblical narrative of Daniel 3 upon the later midrashic narrative of Abraham.⁵⁰

C. Daniel and the Monotheistic Forefather

1. The Islamic Tradition

Interestingly, the correlation between the Daniel and Abraham narratives becomes even more obvious in the *Islamic* accounts of Ibrāhīm's experience in Namrūd's fiery furnace. It seems the Islamic tradition picked up on the initial midrashic association between the two episodes, absorbed both into the Islamic corpus, and expanded upon their preexisting connection. While the pre-Islamic Abraham renditions resemble the Daniel incident mainly in the general outline of events, the Islamic traditions draw more specific detailed correlations that do not appear in the early narratives of Abraham. As described above, the pre-Islamic Abraham accounts tell merely that Abraham, like his Biblical descendants, was thrown into Nimrod's fire for refusing to submit to idolatry and that God saved him (and, through His angel, them) from death. The Islamic sources, however, extend the parallel. In addition to reporting that Ibrāhīm earned punishment by fire for his anti-idolatry ways, the Islamic texts record that the pyre raged so fiercely that a tower or catapult had to be built in order

⁵⁰ Vermes, 89–90. Zakovitch disagrees on this point. He posits that perhaps the midrashic story of Abraham and his brother Haran at Abraham's fire originated as a Biblical narrative that was rejected by the redactors of Genesis. Though excised from Genesis, he postulates, the account left an imprint on Daniel 3. Since this thesis remains in the realm of conjecture, Zakovitch concludes by stating that whatever the truth may be, he no longer believes that the Abraham-Haran account resulted from the influence of Daniel 3. See Zakovitch, "The Exodus from the Ur of the Chaldees," 434–5. Whatever the direction of influence, one would be hard pressed to argue that the two accounts are not related, at the very least in the midrashic mind.

for the people to throw Ibrāhīm in without themselves being incinerated.⁵¹ This recalls Daniel 3:22 which relates that Nebuchadnezzar's furnace was so hot that "a tongue of flame killed the men who carried *up* Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego." The three prisoners then *dropped* into the fire, still chained in their fetters. Daniel 3:20–28 describes that Nebuchadnezzar had ordered Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah bound and thrown into the furnace while wearing their shirts, trousers, hats and other garments. Not long after they landed among the flames, the king spied them walking around inside *unbound*, but their hair was not singed, their shirts looked no different, and even the odor of fire did not cling to them. In similar fashion, the Islamic texts describe that Ibrāhīm was bound in fetters before being hurled into the flames. And, though he was thrown into a raging fire, the flames touched nothing except for his shackles, which were destroyed, thus allowing him free range of motion.⁵² Furthermore, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were joined in the fire by a fourth individual, one whom Nebuchadnezzar understood to be a divine being (Dan. 3:25). Numerous Islamic texts relate that Ibrāhīm did not remain alone in Namrūd's fire either. Rather, he was joined by an angel, often said to be the Angel of Shade.⁵³ And, when Nebuchadnezzar finally ordered Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to come out of the

⁵¹ Al-Qummī, 2:271–2; al-Majlīsī, 12:31–33; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, 3:26; Ibn ‘Asākir (quoting Muqātil), 6:182. Al-Tabarī reports, "فرفعه على رأس البناء" ("and they raised him up to the top of the building") which indicates that a building was built from which they threw him in. See his *Ta’rīkh*, 1:242 (1/263). The Qur’ān (37:97) reads, "ابنوا له بنياناً فالقوه في الجهنم" ("Build a building for him and throw him into the fire/hellfire").

⁵² Ishāq ibn Bishr, 168b; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 5:352; ‘Abd al-Razzāq, 2:24–25; al-Tabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:243 (1/266) and *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 17:44 (quoting Ka'b); al-Majlīsī, 12:44–46; Ibn ‘Asākir, 6:188–9. Al-Kisā’ī, in an interesting departure, maintains that Ibrāhīm was hurled naked into the fire (p. 139). The Qur’ān states that the king commanded a pyre to be built in order to burn Ibrāhīm but says nothing about fetters or accompaniment once in the flames (2:68–69 and 37:97).

⁵³ Ishāq ibn Bishr, 168b; al-Tabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 17:44; Ibn Kathīr (citing al-Suddī), *Tafsīr*, 5:352; al-Qummī, 2:73; al-Majlīsī, 12:33, 42–43; Ibn ‘Asākir, 6:187; al-Suyūṭī, 3:26. See also Ibn Ishāq (d. 768 CE) in Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, 71. On the problems with Newby's methodology, see Conrad, "Recovering Lost Texts," 258–263.

In his *Ta’rīkh*, 1:242 (1/264), al-Tabarī cites Ibn ‘Abbās who notes that while in the fire with the patriarch, a man sat with him wiping sweat from his face. This man was said to be the Angel of Shade. See also Ibn Kathīr (citing Jubayr from al-Dahhāk), *Tafsīr*, 5:352. Ibn ‘Asākir, 6:182, writes that Isrāfil sat on Ibrāhīm's right and Jibrīl sat on his left. Al-Kisā’ī, 139, records that Ibrāhīm was joined by two men of "extreme beauty" as he sat enthroned in the furnace.

furnace, the three simply “came out of the fire” (3:26), which had not been extinguished, alive and well. Likewise, when Ibrāhīm finally left the fire, he did so by simply walking through the flames till he exited, in perfect condition and in full health.⁵⁴

Common factors regarding the genealogy, habits, and deaths of the ruler in each narrative point to an even more extensive Islamic correlation of the Ibrāhīm narrative to the book of Daniel. Perhaps most obvious is the Islamic tendency to construct a familial connection between the two regents. ‘Umāra ibn Wathīma quotes Mujāhid’s statement that Bukhtnaṣṣar (Nebuchadnezzar’s Arabic name) descended from the nation of Namrūd.⁵⁵ Al-Majlīsī maintains that Bukhtnaṣṣar was not only a member of Namrūd’s people but also served in his army.⁵⁶ Al-Ṭabarī takes the association one step further, identifying the later Babylonian regent as a direct descendant of Ibrāhīm’s oppressor, relating his name as Bukhtnaṣṣar ibn Nebuzardan ibn Sannecherib ibn Darius . . . “ibn Namrūd ibn Kūsh ibn Hām ibn Nūh.”⁵⁷ An additional account brought by al-Ṭabarī demonstrates the Muslim exegetical tendency to conflate the two kings with one another. Al-Ṭabarī relates that a certain unnamed idolatrous king known as *al-Ǧabbār min al-Ǧabābira al-Nabatī* (“the most tyrannical Nabatean”) desired to rise to heaven in order to battle Allah. Some say that this referred to Namrūd ibn Kan‘ān, explains al-Ṭabarī, while others claim it was Bukhtnaṣṣar.⁵⁸

Other traditions link the two men to one another on account of their similar infamy as evil-doers. Al-Ṭabarī, followed by al-Majlīsī, recounts a frequently cited tradition stating that four kings ruled over the entire world, two believers and two idolaters. Report after report identifies the idolaters as none other than Namrūd and

⁵⁴ Ibn Ishaq, 71; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:242 (1/265) and *Ǧāmi‘ al-bayān*, 17:44; Ibn ‘Asākir, 6:187–8; al-Kisā’ī, 148; al-Suyūtī, 3:26.

⁵⁵ ‘Umāra ibn Wathīma, *Les légendes prophétiques dans l’Islam: Depuis le Ier jusqu’au III^e siècle de l’Hégire*, ed. Raif Georges Khoury (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), 250.

⁵⁶ 14:353.

⁵⁷ *Ta’rīkh*, 1:542. The list of ancestors oddly also includes “Salamūn ibn Da’ūd.” The earlier *BT Hagigah* 31 and *Pesahim* 94b make the same connection between Nebuchadnezzar and Nimrod, calling him, “Evil One the son of an Evil One! The grandson of the evil Nimrod!”

⁵⁸ *Ǧāmi‘ al-bayān*, 13:244–5. The Islamic sources frequently refer to Namrūd as *Namrūd al-Ǧabbār*, *al-Ǧabbār*, or *Ǧabbār al-Ǧabābīr*. See also Muqātil, 1:572, 2:411, 3:356; ‘Abd al-Razzāq, 1/2:103–105 and 212–213; al-Ya‘qūbī, 18; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:206 (1/217); idem, *Ǧāmi‘ al-bayān*, 3:23; al-Mas’ūdī (896–956 CE), *Murij al-dhabab*, 1:47, 1:249; al-Majlīsī, 12:17; Ibn ‘Asākir, 6:177.

Bukhtnaşşar.⁵⁹ Similarly, al-Qummī describes a version of Bukhtnaşşar's life which resembles Namrūd's remarkably. Bukhtnaşşar dreamed a dream that was interpreted to mean that he would be killed by one of the children of Persia. In an attempt to prevent the realization of such a prediction, the Babylonian king locked all of the gates of his cities so that no foreigner could enter, a move similar to Namrūd's leading his male subjects out of town and/or locking up his female subjects.⁶⁰ Just as Namrūd was defeated by the son of one of his wazirs, Bukhtnaşşar was eventually defeated by the son of one of his servants, a man whom the king did not know was Persian.⁶¹ Al-Majlisī equates the monotheist-burning fires of the two men. Bukhtnaşşar, he reports, commanded his people to build a large fire, “*like the fire of Namrūd*,” into which he would toss anyone who refused to bow to the idol he had built.⁶² Even the deaths of these two tyrants echo one another. According to the Islamic texts, both met their ends when Allah sent a gnat/mosquito that entered through their nostrils into their brains, driving them to insanity by both buzzing and by eating away at them from the inside until they died.⁶³

2. *Daniel and the Post-Qur'ānic Abraham*

As already shown, the pre-Islamic Abrahamic midrashic accounts do not record such detailed parallels between Abraham's episode and that of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. It strikes us as significant therefore that the post-Qur'ānic midrashic narratives appear to follow the lead of the Islamic sources and document a more Daniel-like vision of Abraham in the fiery furnace. These similarities concern the matter of who exactly was thrown in, what it was that burned in the fire, and who it was that made the fire burn.

⁵⁹ Among others: *Ta'rikh*, 1:234, 291–2 (1/253–254, 323–324); al-Majlisī, 11:57.

⁶⁰ See Chapter One, page 44.

⁶¹ 1:89–90.

⁶² 14:368.

⁶³ On Namrūd, see Ishāq ibn Bishr, 160a; Muqātil, 1:215; 'Abd al-Razzāq, 1:106; Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 CE), 15–16; al-Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 3:25–26, 14:97 and *Ta'rikh*, 1:288 (1/320); al-Tha'labī, 116; al-Majlisī, 12:18; al-Kisā'ī, 141. On Bukhtnaşşar, see Ibn Ishāq, 191; al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, 1:555–6 (1/669–670); al-Tha'labī, 416–7. This peculiar form of divine punishment appears to derive from the midrashic death of the emperor Titus in *BT Gittin* 56b; there Titus perishes as a result of a mosquito entering his nostril and banging away in his head for 7 years. Interestingly, the rabbis here refer to Titus as the grandson of Nimrod. A more extensive study of the Namrūd-Bukhtnaşşar connection and its relation to Titus, and even Pharaoh, are beyond the scope of the current study and will be addressed in a further study.

Like the Islamic sources, which themselves recall the Daniel scenario, *Sefer ha-Yashar* (39–40, 42), *Jerahmeel* (64:5), and *Midrash ha-Gadol* (Gen. 11:28) relate that Abraham was thrown into the fire while clothed and bound. And, like the earlier Arabic sources, all three midrashic texts emphasize that not even one iota of harm came to the fore-father; though he sat in the midst of a roaring fire, not even his clothes were singed. *Yashar* takes the parallel one step further and, echoing the Islamic sources' echo of Daniel, declares that while Abraham himself remained untouched by the flames, his fetters burned off immediately.⁶⁴ Similarly, *Yashar* (40–2) relates that 1200 people, those who had brought Abraham to the fire and those standing around, burned to death from the heat but no harm came to Abraham himself. When Nimrod later sent others to remove Abraham from the furnace, 80 more people died. *Jerahmeel* (64:5ff.) tells that when Abraham was thrown into the furnace, God caused a huge earthquake to seize the land. Fire then leaped from the furnace and became a huge blaze which devoured the men standing around. In the end, 84,500 not-so-innocent bystanders burned, and Abraham himself emerged in mint condition. *Midrash ha-Gadol* (Gen. 11:28) reduces the number of bystanders killed to one, albeit a very important one: Haran, Abraham's brother. When Nimrod's magicians saw the patriarch's imperviousness to the fire they declared that the fire refused to burn him in deference to his brother Haran, a fire-respecting astrologer, who was standing nearby. Immediately, relates the text, a tongue of flame shot out and incinerated Haran.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ See n. 52.

⁶⁵ We find a reconfigured version of this narrative, with a different main character, in al-Tabari's *Jāmi' al-bayān* (23:76, quoting Sulaymān ibn Ṣurad): when the fire did not burn Ibrāhīm, the son or nephew of Lūt who was standing nearby declared that Ibrāhīm had been saved on his account. Allah sent forth a tongue of fire and incinerated him. Both this version and that of *Midrash ha-Gadol* reflect a pre-Islamic midrash found in *Genesis Rabbah* 38:13 and later in *Targum Yonatan ben Uzziel* on Haran's death in Gen. 11:28 (see n. 41 and Chapter Appendix): when Abraham was thrown into the furnace, Haran stood by and watched, ambivalent. If Abraham does not burn, he thought, I will align myself with him. But, he continued, if my brother dies in the flames, I will side with Nimrod. When Abraham exited the fire safely, Nimrod's people turned to Haran and asked him where his allegiance lay; Haran sided with his victorious brother. The men immediately hurled him into the fire. Unfortunately for him, his lack of loyalty to and faith in God became his undoing for, unlike Abraham, whose faith had been steadfast and was thus saved, Haran died in the flames. In restructuring the narrative as it does, *Midrash ha-Gadol* departs from the homiletical lesson of the earlier texts, that faith in God must be true *faith*, not *proven*, and it must be unconditional. This post-Qur'ānic text

Despite the prevalence of this detail in the post-Qur'anic Jewish texts, we find no trace of such an out of control fire in the pre-Islamic Abraham midrash. Instead, this detail seems to reflect the Islamic narratives' description of Ibrāhīm's fire as so hot that those standing around were burned. This in itself hearkens back to Daniel's statement that those who had come to throw the three Israelites into the fire were incinerated by the oven that had been heated to seven times its usual heat. Indeed, even the insinuation in Daniel 3:19 that the heating of the fire to seven times its normal heat was a community-wide event, a command issued by the king, reappears with more force in the Islamic sources and then again in some of the post-Qur'anic midrashic texts. According to some of the Islamic narratives, so popular was the building of Ibrāhīm's pyre that sick women would swear to bring more wood for it in return for good health.⁶⁶ Reflecting this, *Midrash ha-Gadol* (Gen. 11:28) declares that everyone volunteered wood for the fire. Similarly, *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* relates that Abraham was arrested and jailed and that for the next ten years, while the patriarch languished in prison, the people gathered wood to contribute to the fire that would burn him.⁶⁷

Interestingly, while many of the Daniel-inspired details that appear in the Islamic sources reappear in the post-Qur'anic midrash, one significant detail does not transfer. Daniel 3:25 relates that although Nebuchadnezzar threw three bound Israelites into the furnace, when next he looked in to check on them, he saw four men walking around

presents the episode in a more Islamic light, emphasizing God's miraculous omnipotence in creating a fire which cannot be contained and which melts humans but nonetheless does not burn Abraham.

In "Ma'aṣeh Ya'ir," Zakovitch wrote that the Haran episode was modeled on Daniel 3. In "The Exodus from Ur of the Chaldeans" (434–438), Zakovitch changes his mind. Here he insists that the Haran tradition was known to the P author of the Bible; P consciously rejected it in order to remove the association of idol worship from the ancestors. Daniel 3, suggests Zakovitch, reflects a *later* imprint of this earlier (yet rejected) account. The Haran tradition survived orally, he maintains, and resurfaced in the post-biblical corpus (as noted above). Zakovitch's thesis is seductive yet it remains in the field of conjecture for now.

⁶⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 5:35; al-Ṭabarī, *Ja'mi' al-bayān*, 17:43–44; idem, *Ta'rīkh*, 1:241–242 (1/265); and, al-Suyūṭī, 3:26. Ishāq ibn Bishr, 168a; Ibn Ishāq, 70–71; al-Qummī, 2:71–72; al-Majlisī, 12:30–33; and Ibn 'Asākir, 6:181 relate that the community all pitched in to help build the large pyre. Al-Kisā'ī, 139, notes that the gathering of wood continued for four years. Al-Tha'labī, 92, shortens the time to one month.

⁶⁷ *PRE*, 6:49.

unbound and unharmed. The fourth, he told his companions, appeared to be an angelic being. Interestingly, we hear no further mention of this being in the book of Daniel. The king commands the three Israelites to exit the furnace (which they do), blesses them and their god, and promotes them. The fourth “man” of the fire appears to have disappeared and neither the king nor the Israelites take notice. Like the three Israelites, Ibrāhīm too receives a visitation from an angel, perhaps the Angel of Shade, who accompanies him while in the furnace.⁶⁸ Despite this sharing of a detail that is both Biblical and Islamic, the Islamically influenced post-Qur’ānic Jewish sources do NOT accept the idea of an angelic escort for Abraham while in the fire. Perhaps the exegetes rejected this idea for its suggestion that someone other than God guarded Abraham. Indeed, as we have noted repeatedly, the midrashic accounts make clear time and again that God Himself, and God alone, saved Abraham.

3. Daniel as Frog Conduit from Egypt to Ibrāhīm

The demonstrated link between the stories of Abraham/Ibrāhīm and the Daniel narrative serves as the key to understanding how the fire-fighting frogs jumped from biblical Pharaonic Egypt to Ibrāhīm’s Chaldea. The connection between Abraham and Daniel 3 that resulted in the midrashic narrative of Abraham in the Chaldean fiery furnace arose from an exegetical, and likely also homiletical, need to address a textual ambiguity. Namely, in Gen. 15:7, God states clearly to Abraham, “I am the Lord Who brought you out from the Ur of the Chaldeans.” And yet, this poses a problem: how could God claim to have brought Abraham out of a place from which the Bible itself states clearly in Gen. 11:31 that *Terah*, not God, moved him? Unconnected to this, the odd word order of Ex. 7:28 (“... into your ovens and into your kneading bowls”) and the halakhic/homiletical issue discussed in *BT Pesahim* 53a (“What did Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah see . . .?”) resulted in the separate association of Daniel’s fire-jumping heroes with Exodus’ amphibian martyrs. Though the three Jewish accounts were unrelated to one another—Gen. 15:7 was connected to Daniel 3 but not to Ex. 7:28 and Ex. 7:28 related to Daniel 3 but not to Genesis—the textual evidence strongly suggests that the Islamic sources meshed the three texts into one narrative, using the

⁶⁸ See p. 198 above and n. 53, 54.

Daniel text as the mediator, even conduit, between Abraham and the Egyptian frogs. Thus, the Islamic narratives describe a forefather who, like the midrashic Abraham and combined with the Biblical court Israelites upon whom his midrashic story is based, was thrown into the fiery furnace, was freed from his shackles, and was joined by a guardian angel who kept him company. Like Abraham and like Nebuchadnezzar's Jews, Ibrāhīm was ultimately redeemed from the flames by Allah. It is due to the independent midrashic association between Daniel and yet another fire episode, the narrative expansion of the martyr-frogs of Exodus, that the Islamic sources on Ibrāhīm in Namrūd's fire add that Allah's rescue was preceded by the attempt of a righteous frog who, acting as a volunteer fireman, attempted to save the forefather from the flames.⁶⁹

V. Significance of the Frog

Like the motif of the finger-food, this amphibious mini-motif demonstrates not only the interrelatedness of the Muslim and midrashic extra-Scriptural traditions but also highlights the philosophical differences between the Islamic and Jewish conceptualizations of the forefather. Here too the dissimilarity between the depictions of the two religious traditions revolves around the issue of the patriarch's predestined role and personality. In its own subtle, almost subconscious way, the behavior of Ibrāhīm's frog supports the Islamic depiction of Ibrāhīm as a man foreordained for greatness and special treatment by the Divine: Ibrāhīm's extraordinary nature was recognized not only by God, but by the animal kingdom. As we have already seen, other animals had similarly recognized Ibrāhīm's exceptional nature early on in his life; bears, usually vicious beasts, calmly suckled him in his mother's absence in this cave and even lined his eyes with kohl.⁷⁰ Now, without having been commanded to do so, the frog miraculously stepped forward to aid Ibrāhīm in his time of need. In fact, the narratives record that the frog jumped forward *before* Ibrāhīm demonstrated conclusively his commitment to Allah and to reject idolatry. This comes a few minutes later in the story;

⁶⁹ The Islamic tradition tells of other prophets saved from fires as well. I intend to address this issue further under separate cover.

⁷⁰ See Chapter Three, p. 143 n. 10.

as Ibrāhīm is tossed into the furnace, Jibrīl approaches and offers his help. Ibrāhīm rejects the angel's life-saving proposal, which comes at the most desperate of moments for the patriarch, on the grounds that he trusts only in Allah for his salvation. Only upon hearing these words, the final proof of Ibrāhīm's loyalty to his Lord, does Allah come to His servant's aid and cool the fire down for him. The frogs, however, await no such final display of loyalty. Rather, recognizing the man's blessed character right away, they step forward to help well before his mettle is tested. Somehow, before he has a chance to utter even one word of praise to or faith in Allah, the frogs miraculously recognize him as Allah's beloved.⁷¹ In including this motif, the Islamic sources thus reinforce their presentation of Ibrāhīm as Allah's predetermined chosen one to whom miracles occur time after time after time, even before he proves himself worthy of them.

The midrashic omission of the fire-fighting frogs at Abraham's pyre transmits the opposite point of view. In the narratives of Abraham's conception, birth, youth and discovery of God, the midrashic sources strive to depict a wholly human character, one whose early life is free from miracles and any form of Divine intervention. Fire-fighting frogs, a truly extraordinary creation, clash absolutely with such a portrayal. After all, under normal circumstances frogs do not behave this way, even around those who are very pious. Their peculiarly miraculous behavior here indicates the presence of an already confirmed friend of God, a status that even they, small-brained creatures that they are, recognize. As such, the midrashic texts consistently and completely refuse to make the final connection between the texts of Daniel and Abraham which would possibly result in such a reference. Instead, when God finally does inject Himself into Abraham's life, He does so in person (so to speak). He Himself, without any assistants, amphibious aides, angelic messengers, or the like, descends from His heavenly throne in order to save the man who had risked life and limb out of loyalty to his Lord. This remains true in the post-Qur'ānic midrashic narratives as it does in the pre-Islamic sources; despite the fact that the later midrashic accounts follow the lead of the Islamic renderings in a number of details, they draw the line at the frog. In rejecting the frog motif, they conform to the previously established midrashic understanding of Abraham as a man to whom little

⁷¹ See the Islamic accounts as cited above.

that is miraculous occurs until the very moment that God Himself descends from heaven to aid him. Additionally, rejecting the frog ensures that direct and immediate relationship between God and His chosen patriarch remains in tact.⁷²

In a sense, the midrashic fire episode thus constitutes a moment of truth for both Abraham and God. At the fire Abraham establishes himself absolutely as a loyal monotheist whose willingness to relinquish his life in his devotion to God destroys any possible lingering doubts about his commitment. His self-sacrifice proves him worthy of God's attention. Similarly, at the fire God demonstrates His omnipotence and complete control over the world and its elements, cooling that which is hot, saving that which should have burned, overturning the judgement of man as He sees fit, and rewarding those who prove truly loyal to Him. Indeed, any attempt by a frog, or any other creature of His own creation, to cool off the fire would serve only to diminish the magnitude and unique character of His power and actions as well as of the extent of the greatness of Abraham's independent character in remaining loyal to God even in the face of such great adversity.

Summary

Like the finger-food motif, the motif of the fabulous frogs constitutes yet another manifestation of the intertextual forces affecting the Islamic and midrashic narratives of the forefather. In order to address a textual problem in Genesis, the midrashic sources, basing themselves on linguistic parallels, drew on a narrative from the Book of Daniel. The intra-traditional borrowing resulted here in an early midrashic account of Abraham in the fiery furnace of Nimrod. This account subsequently infiltrated the biographies of the forefather in the Islamic tradition. Utilizing the already established connection to the Daniel narrative, the Islamic tradition expanded upon the midrashic accounts of Abraham in Nimrod's fire to create the more detailed reports of Ibrāhīm in Namrūd's fire. Through this meshing of the traditions of Daniel with Abraham, the Islamic texts picked up on

⁷² This idea receives reinforcement from the rabbinic rejection of an angel who accompanies Abraham in his fiery ordeal. See above, pp. 202–203.

a separate midrashic connection that existed between Daniel and the frogs of Exodus. Thus from their home in Exodus, these frogs made their way, in a form slightly modified to fit their new context, to the Ibrāhīm narrative.

Like the finger-food motif, this intertextually adventurous minimotif serves as yet another indicator for understanding how each tradition comprehended the patriarch's character. In depicting the frog's unnatural attempts to save Ibrāhīm's life, the Islamic tradition reinforced its portrayal of Ibrāhīm as a man whose life was filled with supernatural occurrences, guided and protected by the hand of Allah. Once again, magical and supernatural events surround Ibrāhīm, ensuring that no evil befalls him. In excluding the frog from the Abraham context, the post-Qur'ānic midrashic texts rejected precisely this depiction and reinforced instead the opposite conception, as set up by the pre-Islamic narratives. As is the case for the rest of the mass of humankind, Abraham's early life boasts no supernatural intervention. In perfectly human fashion, he recognizes the truth about his Creator and risks his life in faithful service of Him. God, in turn, recognizes Abraham's loyalty and righteousness and He Himself ultimately comes to His servant's aid in his time of true crisis. Indeed, it appears that one of the messages of the Abraham story concerns an issue beyond the biography of the forefather himself. Rather, the life of Abraham and his continued ability to escape the assaults of his detractors demonstrates the saving grace and victory of the true faith in the one God over idolatry, an example his descendants are taught to follow.

APPENDIX

Q 21:51–71⁷³

[51] We had earlier given Abraham true direction, for We knew him well. [52] When he said to his father and his people: “What are these idols to which you cling so passionately?” [53] They replied: “We found our fathers worshipping them.” [54] He said: “You and your fathers were in clear error.” [55] They said: “Are you speaking in earnest or only jesting?” [56] He said: “In fact it was your Lord, the Lord of the heavens and the earth, who created them; I bear witness to this. [57] I swear by God I will do something to your idols when you have turned your backs and gone.” [58] So he smashed them up to pieces, with the exception of the biggest, so that they may turn to it. [59] They asked (on return): “Who has done this to our gods? He is surely a mischief-monger.” [60] They said: “We heard a youth talk about them. He is called Abraham.” [61] “Bring him before the people,” they said, “that he may bear witness.” [62] “Did you do this to our gods, O Abraham?” they enquired. [63] “No,” he said. “It was done by that chief of theirs. Ask him in case they can speak.” [64] Then they thought and observed: “Surely you are yourselves unjust.” [65] Then crestfallen (they confessed): “Truly, as you know, they cannot speak.” [66] (So Abraham) said: “Then why do you worship something apart from God that cannot profit you or do you harm? [67] Fie on you and those you worship besides God! Will you not understand?” [68] They said: “Burn him and save your gods, if you are men of action.” [69] “Turn cold, O fire,” We said, “and give safety to Abraham.” [70] They wished to entrap him, but We made them the greater losers. [71] So We delivered him and Lot, and brought them to the land We had blessed for all the people.

⁷³ Ahmed Ali, trans., *Al-Qur’ān: A Contemporary Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

BT Sanhedrin 74a

R. Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Jehotzadak: By a majority vote, it was resolved in the attic of Nitza's house in Lydda that for every law of the Torah, if a man is ordered: 'Transgress and you will not be killed' he may/should transgress and not be killed, except in the cases of idolatry, illicit sexual relations,⁷⁴ and murder.

Now, may not idolatry be practiced [under these circumstances]? Was it not taught:

R. Ishmael said: from where do we know that if they said to a man, 'Engage in idolatry and not be killed', that he should do so, and not be killed? Scripture teaches [Lev. 18:5], "Live by them" but not die by them.⁷⁵

One might think that the above is true [i.e. one may not sacrifice oneself if ordered to worship idols] even if practiced in public. But Scripture teaches, "You shall not desecrate My holy name but I will be hallowed [among the children of Israel]" [Lev. 22:32].

They [the rabbis] ruled in accordance with R. Eliezer. For it has been taught:

R. Eliezer said: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might" [Deut. 6:5]. Since 'with all your soul' is stated, why is 'with all your might' stated? Or, if it says 'with all your might,' why also say 'with all your soul'? If you are dealing with a man whose life is more precious to him than his money, "with all your soul" is written. And if you are dealing with one whose money is more precious to him than his life, therefore it says 'with all your might.'

"Illicit sexual relations and murder [may not be practiced to save one's life]"—as Rabbi's dictum indicates.⁷⁶ For it has been taught:

Rabbi said, "For like a man who rises up against his fellow and murders him, so is this thing" [Deut. 22:26]. Now, what do we learn [about a betrothed maiden] from this analogy of a murderer? [Nothing]. Thus, this comes to throw light and is itself illumined. The verse compares a murderer to a betrothed maiden: just as a betrothed maiden must

⁷⁴ By which is meant incest and adultery.

⁷⁵ The complete verse reads, "You shall therefore keep My statutes, and My ordinances, which if a person does, he shall live by them, I am the Lord."

⁷⁶ "Rabbi" is R. Judah the Nasi (or, Prince), the redactor of the Mishna, who lived ca. latter half of the second-beginning of the third century CE.

be saved [from rape] at the cost of his [her pursuer's] life, so in the case of a murderer, he [the victim] must be saved at the cost of his [the would-be murderer's] life. And the verse compares a betrothed maiden to a murderer: just as with a murderer, one must be submit to being killed rather than commit murder, so too must a betrothed maiden submit to being killed rather than transgress.”

That a would-be murderer must submit to death [rather than murder], how do we know this?—It is logic/common sense. As in the case of that one who came before Rabbah and said to him, “The governor of my town has ordered me, “Go and kill so and so; if not, I will kill you.” He [Rabbah] said to him, ‘Let him kill you and do not kill; for who knows that your blood is redder? Perhaps the blood of that man is redder.”

When R. Dimi came, he said in the name of R. Johanan: This was taught only if there is no royal decree.⁷⁷ But if there is a royal decree, one must submit to be killed rather than transgress even a minor precept. When Rabin came, he said in the name of R. Johanan: Even when it is not the time of a royal decree, they said this only regarding that which takes place in private. But in public, one must submit to be killed rather than violate even a minor precept.

Genesis Rabbah 38:13

“And Haran died in the presence of [‘al penei] his father Terah” (Genesis 11:28). R. Hiyya the grandson of R. Ada of Jaffa said: Terah was an idol worshiper/manufacturer. One time, he went away somewhere and left Abraham in his place to sell them. A man would come in who wished to buy one. He [Abraham] would say to him, “How old are you?” He would say, “Fifty or sixty years old.” He [Abraham] said, “Woe to such a man who is sixty years old and would bow before a day-old object!” He would become ashamed and leave. One time a woman came carrying a plateful of fine flour. She said to him, “Take this and offer it before them.” He arose, took a stick in his hands, and broke them all into pieces, then put

⁷⁷ Oppressive royal decrees required Jews to violate Jewish law in order to stamp out Torah observance. The decrees offered Jews the option of violating Jewish law or facing death for observing them.

the stick in the hand of the largest of them. When his father returned he said, "What happened to them that they are like this?" He [Abraham] said, "How can I hide the matter from you? A woman came with a plateful of fine flour and said to me, 'Offer it before them.' I came before them and this one said, 'I will eat first,' and that one said, 'I will eat first.' Then this big one among them stood, took a stick, and broke them." [He said], "Why are you ridiculing me?! Do they have any knowledge?!" He [Abraham] said to him, "And should not your ears hear what your mouth utters?" He [Terah] seized him and delivered him to Nimrod.

He [Nimrod] said, "Let us worship the fire!"

He [Abraham] said, "Let us worship water, which extinguishes fire."

He said, "Let us worship water."

He [Abraham] said to him, "If so, let us worship the clouds, which carry the water."

He said to him, "Let us worship the clouds."

He [Abraham] said to him, "If so, let us worship the wind, which moves the clouds."

He said to him, "Let us worship the wind."

He [Abraham] said to him, "Let us worship human beings, who withstand the wind."

"You are just throwing words about," he [Nimrod] exclaimed. "I worship nothing but fire; behold, I will throw you into it, and let your God whom you bow before come and save you from it."

Haran was standing there arguing with himself. He said, 'If Abram is victorious, I will say that I am of Abram's camp. If Nimrod wins, I will say that I am of Nimrod's camp.' When Abram descended into the fiery furnace and was saved, they asked him, "Which camp are you of?" He said to them, "Of Abram's." They took him and threw him into the fire and his insides melted and he died in the presence of (or, before) his father. Therefore Scripture writes, "And Haran died in the presence of/before (*'al penei*) his father Terah."⁷⁸

⁷⁸ *'Al penei* can mean both "in the presence of" and "before," in the chronological sense.

CHAPTER FIVE

ABRAHAM, IBRĀHĪM, MOSES, AND MUHAMMAD

I. Abraham and Moses

As we have seen in the previous chapters, many of the details of the later midrashic portrait of the early life of Abraham derive ultimately from Islamic depictions of Ibrāhīm. The themes of sibyllic prophecy, government ordered infanticide, birth in a cave, miraculous nursing, and precocious growth all fall under this rubric. While the Jewish tradition adopted these Islamic accounts, it was careful to adapt the material as well, to mold and reformat the narrative in line with its own religious value system. Thus, the biography of the Islamic forefather emphasizes God's controlling hand over the flow of human events, specifically as it relates to the founder of monotheism. The midrashic versions, those that precede as well as follow the Islamic accounts, continuously stress humankind's free will and responsibility, the ability and the imperative of each person, no matter what his or her circumstances, to choose right over wrong. Ibrāhīm lives in a world governed by complete divine will, one in tune with the Qur'ānic proclamation, "whomsoever God guides, he is rightly guided; and whom He leads astray, they are the losers" (7:178). Conversely, the world in which the midrashic Abraham lives functions in accordance with the laws of *שכָר וְעִונֶשׁ* (*sakhar va-'onesh*), reward and punishment: do good and you are rewarded with God's favor; do evil and punishment ensues.

Understanding this underlying difference between the traditions' portrayals of their shared forefather brings with it a question: *why* the consistent and emphatic insistence on the part of the midrashic corpus, both early and late, in depicting Abraham as the master of his own fate? Even the Bible itself portrays Abraham as the recipient of arbitrary divine favor. At Abraham's first appearance in the Bible, Genesis 11:10–32 presents his genealogical affiliation, the death of his brother Haran, the barrenness of his wife Sarai, and the family's move, on Terah's initiative, from Ur to the land of Ḥaran. Then, in the very first verses of the subsequent chapter, God, suddenly and

with no given cause, appears to Abraham, orders him to move countries, and promises him blessings of renown, abundance, and greatness. Such a scenario hardly conveys the sense that Abraham earned God's attentions. Abraham appears instead to have been selected by God as a result of inscrutable divine will, a characterization more in consonance with the later Islamic depiction of the man.

Furthermore, the idea of prophecy as a divinely predestined state does not stand antithetical to the pre-Islamic midrashic value system. The early midrashic narratives of Moses, preeminent among the Israelite prophets, embody precisely this fated model. And, as we have seen, many of the elements that appear in the post-Qur'ānic midrashic Abraham derive ultimately—with the similarly predetermined Ibrāhīm as the mediating text—from narratives on or associated with the midrashic Moses. This fact becomes particularly important when we note that the *biblical* narrative of Moses depicts a man whose personality and behavior *earn* him the role of leader of a nation. The pre-Islamic midrash, however, shifts the emphasis away from Moses' actions. Instead, the early midrashic narratives provide readers with a Moses whose personality and role is divinely foreordained. He does not have to prove himself worthy; God simply decreed that he is. If the midrash thus *can* write of a predestined prophet (Moses), why does it choose not to with Abraham whose biblical account seems to require it and whose post-Qur'ānic incarnation (Ibrāhīm) derives from it?

A. Moses

Before we move to the question posed above, let us first understand this last point. Namely, as presented in the biblical text, Moses cuts a figure who affects his own destiny; he proves himself before the Lord and the Lord, as a *result*, chooses him as His earthly messenger. The pre-Islamic midrash, however, transforms this portrayal of the Israelite leader into its opposite. In early extra-Scriptural texts, Moses no longer represents the paradigm of an active free-will but appears to his readers as a man whose life's path was chosen arbitrarily by the will of God.

1. Moses in the Bible

The Biblical depiction of the non-divine nature of the Moses' early life begins well before he is born, in Exodus 1–2. As is natural in

human circles, a man of the tribe of Levi went and took for himself a wife from his own tribe. In due time and in tune with laws of nature, she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. Now at that time, Pharaoh had issued certain decrees against the Israelites who he felt were multiplying too quickly and would soon form a dangerous fifth column. He therefore ordered that all newborn Israeli boys were to be killed in infancy. The Levite woman managed to hide her child for three months and when she found she no longer could, she placed him in an ark at the banks of the Nile River. Serendipitously, the king's daughter had just then gone down to the river to bathe and spotted the small ark at the river's edge. She drew it in and opened it. Finding a crying child inside and determining somehow that he was a Hebrew child, she took mercy upon him. The child's sister, who had been keeping guard at a distance, then stepped forward to offer to find a wet-nurse. The princess agreed and the girl arranged for the child's own mother to nurse him.¹ He remained with his biological family until he was weaned. At that point he was returned to the Egyptian princess, who adopted him and named him Moses. Significantly, neither God's name nor His hand appears in this pericope. Rather, the course of events is directed solely by humans with no divine intervention whatsoever. Avigdor Shinan writes that the Biblical description of Moses' conception and birth is so purposely banal, recounting a scenario that has occurred millions of times throughout human history, that even the key players remain anonymous. Not one of them is named. One wonders, says Shinan, why the Bible bothered to include the episode at all.²

Anonymity notwithstanding, Shinan's wonderment at the banality of Moses' beginnings is somewhat misplaced. Moses' extremely ordinary human beginnings are not superfluous material but serve to underscore the greatness of the man when he later *chooses* justice and Israel over luxury in Egypt. The Bible relates that although he was raised in the king's court as a member of Pharaoh's own family, Moses never forsook his native people, now enslaved, and time after time proved himself a champion of the oppressed and the weak, willing to risk his life on their behalf. When, as a prince, he finds

¹ Whether the daughter of Pharaoh understood what the relationship was between her foundling child and his wet-nurse is not clear from the verses. See Ex. 2:6–10.

² Avigdor Shinan, "Leidato shel Moshe Rabbeinu be-Re'i Sifrut Hazal," *Rimonim* 5 (1997): 4–7.

an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave, he strikes down the Egyptian. Fearing retribution by Pharaoh, Moses abandons his life of comfort in the palace and flees to the harshness of the desert (Ex. 2:11–15). When we next see him, he is continuing his commitment to defend the defenseless. A stranger alone in Midian, he single-handedly defends Jethro's daughters against the abuses of a group of shepherds at the communal well (Ex. 2:16–17). This biblical Moses also displays intellectual curiosity and humility, both traits necessary for a successful leader. Upon encountering an oddly burning bush, he approaches it to investigate; only *after* his initial approach does God call him forward to it (Ex. 3:1–6). And, he initially refuses to be God's messenger to Pharaoh, saying humbly (Ex. 3:11), "Who I am that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites?" If one were to judge Moses on the biblical evidence alone, one would understand him to be a completely mortal figure whose exceptional personality and commitment to truth and justice *earned* him God's favor.

2. *Moses in the Midrash*

Despite the Biblical emphasis on Moses' own character as the catalyst for his relationship with the Divine, the pre-Islamic midrash portrays him as a man *fated* to be the Israelite redeemer.³ The early midrashic corpus disconnects the man's prophetic status from his winning personality and behavior and, in a sense, does away with the latter. This contrasts with the midrashic method of operation in Abraham's case, where the post-biblical exegetical narratives transform the biblically foreordained prophet into one who *earns* his position. And, as we have seen, the deviation from the Abraham model occurs despite the use of the very same narratives in both their biographies. This further emphasizes our point that the idea of predetermined prophet was not antithetical to the midrashic mind.

According to the pre-Islamic midrashic narratives, the hand of God touched Moses' life before he was even conceived, in the form of pre-natal predictions. Josephus Flavius (37–100 CE) and the Babylonian Talmud in *Sotah* 12a (6th century CE) both relate that the Egyptians received a prophecy that a woman would soon deliver a child who, if reared past infancy, would redeem the Israelites from

³ At some point in time, the midrash returns to the biblical idea of Moses as having earned his status. See n. 18 for an example of this. However, those midrashic texts that date to the pre-Islamic era largely depict Moses in a predestined light.

Egyptian dominion.⁴ A similar prophecy arrived in the Israelite camp as well. *BT Sotah* 11a, 12a, and 13a relate that when she was a young girl, Moses' older sister Miriam would prophesy that her mother was fated to give birth to a son who would redeem Israel. Josephus attributes such advance knowledge to Moses' father Amram, rather than his sister Miriam. According to Josephus, God appeared to Amram in a vision and revealed to him that his unborn son would redeem Israel from the Egyptian slavery.⁵

Furthermore, according to these texts, certain elements of Moses' birth itself confirm his already special status. When Moses' mother went into labor, her labor was so easy that even those watching her were unaware of what was then happening.⁶ At the moment of his birth, explain the rabbis in *BT Sotah* 12a, the room filled with light. Additionally, continue the sources, the Egyptians consistently searched for Israelites violating Pharaoh's edict; upon hearing that an Israelite child had been born, Egyptian women would bring their infants to the Israelite home and pinch them, causing them to cry. Hearing their cries, the hidden Israelite babies would cry out in empathetic response, thus revealing themselves. Moses, however, never cried out and never revealed himself. His mother thus hid the child at home for three whole months before having to place him on the Nile.⁷

Supernatural elements accompanied the infant Moses from the house of his mother into the next stage of his life as well. When the daughter of Pharaoh saw Moses' ark floating in the Nile, she immediately recognized it as a child-carrier and commanded her maid-servants to reel it in. They argued with her, saying that her father had commanded that boy children should be thrown into the Nile and here she wanted to disobey his direct order. God intervened to rectify the situation, relates the Talmud; He sent the archangel Gabriel, who struck the maid-servants dead.⁸ The princess then

⁴ According to Josephus, the prophecy reached the king directly through a sacred scribe, “sagacious in foretelling future events truly.” See Josephus, *Antiquities*, II:9:2 (205–209). The midrashic shift from an Egyptian plan intended to weaken Israel as a nation, as in the Bible, to a plan aimed at destroying one specific Israelite has already been discussed above in Chapter One. The reappearance of the redirected plan in the narratives of Jesus likewise appears there, pp. 81–85.

⁵ *Antiquities*, II:9:3 (210–216).

⁶ *Antiquities*, II:9:4 (218).

⁷ *BT Sotah* 12a; *Song of Songs Rabbah* (500–640 CE), 2:15; *Exodus Rabbah* (10th century CE), 1:20 (4).

⁸ *BT Sotah* 12b.

stretched out her hand to pull the ark in but it was just beyond her reach. Once again, God intervened on Moses' behalf. Miraculously, the princess' arm lengthened and she was able to grab the ark and bring it in.⁹ As soon as she opened the basket, she saw how beautiful the child was, for “God had taken great care in his formation.” She fell in love with the baby, adopted him as her own son, and named him Moses.¹⁰ An odd problem immediately arose, however: the Hebrew infant refused to suckle from the breasts of the idolatrous Egyptian women. Miriam his sister was thus able to arrange for the baby’s mother to take him home and become his wet-nurse.¹¹ Whereas Pharaoh had hoped to disrupt the coming of the Israelite savior, God arranged not only for his survival but also returned him to the bosom of his true family. God’s plan could not be averted. Moreover, in having Moses subsequently adopted into the house of the very man whose desire to destroy him necessitated such an adoption, the midrashic narrative expansions further the idea of the futility of trying to outwit God and disrupt His plans. As Josephus states, in placing Miriam at the water’s edge, “God demonstrated that human wisdom was nothing but that the Supreme Being is able to do whatsoever He pleases.”¹²

Moses the adult encounters similar miracles in the years preceding his first experience with the Divine. Witnessing an Egyptian taskmaster striking a Hebrew slave in order to kill him, Moses jumped forward and struck the Egyptian dead. R. Nehemia and R. Levi maintain that Moses killed the man by uttering the name of God, a secret name that even at this early stage, prior to his manifest relationship with God, Moses instinctively and miraculously knew.¹³ Pharaoh arrested him and ordered him executed for his crime. God,

⁹ *BT Sotah* 12b; See also *Exodus Rabbah*, 1:27. The princess’ long arm appears to be a pun on the Hebrew word אֲמָה (amah) which can mean maidservant, arm, or a cubit (a measure equal to the distance from a man’s elbow to the tip of the middle finger). Exodus 2:5 tells that the daughter of Pharaoh spied Moses’ basket among the reeds and “sent her slave girl (amatah) to fetch it.” Literally, the verse reads, “she sent forth her *amatah* and she took it [the basket].” The ambiguous reference of the second pronoun, she, and the multiple meanings of *amatah* allowed for an alternate reading of the verse: the daughter of Pharaoh sent forth her own arm, which lengthened a cubit’s length in the sending, and she herself took the basket out of the water.

¹⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, II:9:5 (224–225).

¹¹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, II:9:5 (226–227); *BT Sotah* 12b–13a.

¹² *Antiquities*, II:9:4 (222).

¹³ *Leviticus Rabbah* (400–500 CE), 32:5.

however, turned Moses' neck to marble. The executioner's sword simply bounced off him, striking the executioner instead.¹⁴ Moses then fled to Midian where he was taken in by the family of Jethro, a Midianite priest. While herding Jethro's sheep one day, Moses came upon a bush that burned without being consumed by the flames. Before he could draw near to investigate on his own, as he does in the biblical text, thus demonstrating his worthiness through courage and intellectual curiosity, the voice of God emanated forth from the bush and commanded Moses to approach.¹⁵

II. *Josephus as Source*

The transformation of Moses from a biblical hero who earns God's attention to a midrashic character whose life is fated and preordained thus drives home the question regarding Abraham. Again, in writing the narratives of the independent Abraham, the post-Qur'ānic midrash adopts and transforms motifs from the predestined Ibrāhīm. One might posit that this manipulation of the texts occurs because Judaism cannot suffer a predetermined prophet. However, as we have seen, these narratives ultimately derive from the midrashic Moses, or from narratives associated with him, where they are used to emphasize his foreordained status. What's more, other midrashic episodes, such as those above, further this divinely guided characterization of Moses. If the midrash *can* write of a predestined prophet, as it does with Moses, why does it do otherwise with Abraham, whose Ibrāhīm-inspired portrayal would seem to require it? One possible response rests in the *sitz im leben* in which the midrashic narratives on Moses and Abraham were created.

A. *Moses*

As illustrated in Chapter One and cited above, the earliest documented, most complete running narrative on the very similar birth narratives

¹⁴ *Leviticus Rabbah*, 6:5; *Song of Songs Rabbah*, 7:5, *Talmud Yerushalmi* [Jerusalem Talmud] (c. 5th century CE), (Berlin: Hotsa'at Sefarim, 5685 [1925]), *Berakhot* 9a. The *Talmud Yerushalmi* further states that Moses was able to flee to Midian when an angel came down and took his shape, thus allowing him to escape prison.

¹⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities*, II:12:1–2 (264–271).

of Moses and Abraham in the extra-Scriptural midrashic sources dates to the Moses saga in the *Antiquities of the Jews* by the aforementioned Jewish general and historian, Josephus Flavius (37–100 CE). Josephus' text is the earliest remaining source to tell of a ruler receiving a prophecy about a future rebel even before the child was born and, similarly, it is the earliest to explain that the ruler ordered his people to destroy the newborn boys as a precaution against the fulfillment of this prophecy (II:9:2 [205–9]).¹⁶ The miracle of the hidden pregnancy and birth likewise appears in Josephus' biography of Moses. According to *Antiquities*, Jochebed's labor remained undetected, even to those watching her, since it “did not come upon her with violence” (II:9:4 [218]). Furthermore, Josephus' Mosaic biography presents the otherworldly aspect of the hero-child's nursing when Josephus writes that the Hebrew infant refused to be suckled by non-Hebrews (II:9:5 [224–5]).¹⁷

Josephus configures not only his own narrative expansions to depict Moses as a fated character but also rewrites biblical episodes to fit his depiction. While other early exegetical sources include the biblical depiction of Moses as a man who earns his stripes alongside that of a predestined Moses, Josephus reduces Moses to the predestined mode entirely.¹⁸ Exodus 2:16 tells that Moses, while yet living

¹⁶ Josephus, a priest (*kohen*) and military general educated in rabbinic traditions, probably was not the originator of this sibyllic account. More likely, he redacted a number of well-known midrashic passages on Moses' birth and life, derived from exegetical and homiletical issues, into one sequential “historical” narrative with its own polemical bent. For example, the sibyllic motif appears also in *BT Sotah* 12b in the name of R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (end 1st-beginning 2nd century CE), a contemporary of Josephus. See *EJ*, s.v. “Eliezer b. Hyrcanus” by Y. D. Gilat (6:619). Not all Josephus' contemporaries agreed with his presentation of the events. Neither the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo Judaeus (20 BCE–50 CE) nor Ezekiel the Tragedian (c. 1st part 2nd century CE) mentions any such prophecy or miracle. Both follow more closely the events as they appear in the Bible. See “De Vita Mosis,” in Coulon's *Philo*, 6:279–281; and *Ezekiel the Tragedian*, trans. R. G. Robertson, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1985), 2:803–819. H. W. Basser analyzed Josephus' use of contemporary rabbinic materials in “Josephus as Exegete,” *JAOS* 107 (1987): 21–30.

¹⁷ The idea of the miraculous involved in Moses' suckling appears in an anonymous pericope in *BT Sotah* 12b where God explains, “Should a mouth that will speak with the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence) suck that which is unclean?” Since the Babylonian Talmud did not close until the 6th century CE, 400–500 years after Josephus, we cannot determine if Josephus authored this idea or if it was an idea already popular in rabbinic circles. Given that Josephus was not himself an exegete proper but a student of the rabbinic tradition, the latter option strikes me as the more probable.

¹⁸ Throughout *Leviticus Rabbah* the rabbis record a number of instances depicting

in the royal residence, went out to see the suffering of his Israelite brethren slaves. As he watched, an Egyptian taskmaster began beating an Israelite laborer. Moses jumped into the fray and slew the offending Egyptian and then, fearing punishment from Pharaoh, fled to the Midianite desert. In recounting Moses' biography, Josephus conspicuously omits this defining act of identification with the enslaved Israelites; his Moses remains uninvolved in any altercations between slaves and Egyptian taskmasters and most assuredly he does not slay anyone. Instead, Josephus' Moses flees to Midian because the great love the Egyptians held for him turned to jealous hatred after he led them to victory in a war against Ethiopia.¹⁹ Similarly, the Biblical narrative subsequently relates that the intellectually curious Moses approached the burning bush first and only afterward did God talk to him from within. Josephus, however, replaces Moses' initiative

Moses as predestined for prophecy. Amid such portrayals, *Lev. Rabbah* 37:2 (2) indicates the opposite. Commenting on Exodus 2:11, "and he [Moses] witnessed their [the Israelite's] labors," *Lev. Rabbah* explains: Moses saw that the Egyptians forced a man to carry a woman's burden, a small child to carry that of an adult, an old person to carry the burden of a young man and vice versa in all three cases. Moses stepped in and rearranged the affair, assigning each person the burden that was appropriate to his strength. God said to him: Because you demonstrated the understanding and compassion to set things justly today, by My life, you will do the same with My children in the future.

The later midrashic corpus seconds the combination of a Moses as predestined child with that of a Moses who merited his position. *Exodus Rabbah* (10th century) 1:28 and 1:30, among other places, twice describes an angel interfering in the child's life to ensure that no harm befalls him and that his life takes the course drawn out for him by God. Other pericopes portray him in the opposite light. Commenting on Ex. 3:1 ["Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness."], *Exodus Rabbah* 2:2 explains why Moses would have brought the sheep to such an inappropriate and far-off grazing area. It seems a little lamb had run away from the flock and Moses had chased after it. When the lamb reached some bushes near a pond of water, it stopped and began to drink. Moses declared, "I didn't know you ran all this way because you were thirsty; you must be tired now." Moses lifted the lamb onto his shoulders and carried it back to the flock. God saw all this and said, "You who tend the sheep with such mercy will be a compassionate leader for My sheep, Israel." One who exhibited such mercy for mere animals, especially those belonging to someone else (his father-in-law), exhibited the personality needed to lead God's nation.

¹⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, II:10–11:1 (238–255). This war does not appear in the Bible. Interestingly, similar Egyptian-Ethiopian squirmishes appear in *Exodus Rabbah*'s commentary on Exodus 7:27. Here the rabbis note that the frog plague actually aided the Egyptians, who were embroiled in an ongoing border dispute with the Ethiopians. Since the frogs struck only Egypt and the Egyptians, the two nations learned that whatever territory remained frog-free belonged to Ethiopia. See Avigdor Shinan, ed., *Exodus Rabbah 1–14* (Jerusalem: Dvir, 1984), 1:2.

with God's guidance of him: God first calls out to Moses from the bush and only afterward does Moses think to approach.²⁰ Additionally, Josephus twice identifies Moses as a *prophet* of God where the biblical text titles him differently.²¹

Louis Feldman cites a number of factors explaining Josephus' characterization of a Moses so in opposition to the Biblical depiction.²² Josephus, he notes, was writing a history of the Jews specifically for a non-Jewish Hellenistic audience, one which had just defeated the independent Jewish kingdom in Israel. Moses constituted the one figure in the Jewish world most familiar to Josephus' pagan readership. In fact, many Hellenistic writers ranked Moses among history's greatest lawgivers and often referred to him by name without providing other details, assuming, it would seem, that their readers already knew who Moses was. Other pagan writers championed the opposite view, casting aspersions on Moses and maligning him as a charlatan and an imposter. On this side stood such luminaries as the influential Hellenistic rhetoricians Apion (1st century CE) and Apollonius Molon (ca. 1st century BCE). Out of a combination of ignorance and ill-will, many of these same writers charged the Jews with failing to produce any inventors in the arts or any eminent sages.

In his depiction of Biblical characters, Josephus took it upon himself to answer these charges. In order to convince his Hellenistic audience of the great heritage of the Jewish people, he strove to portray Jewish heroes in the same light in which the Greeks viewed their own. And so, he presented a midrashic model of Moses that cast him in a light similar to that of the Greek hero. Hellenistic hero sagas often relate that before the hero is born, the reigning king receives a prophecy stating that a child will overthrow him; the king attempts to prevent the child from being born and when that fails, orders him thrown into the sea; the child is rescued and raised in a foster family and returns as an adult to overthrow the king and thus fulfill

²⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, II:12:1 (264–271). For other examples, see Louis Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Moses," *JQR* 82 (1992): 285–328; 83 (1992–3): 7–50, 301–330.

²¹ As noted by Feldman in *JQR* 83: 45; *Antiquities*, II:15:4 (327) v. Ex. 14:31 [God's "servant"], and *Antiquities*, IV:8:48 (320) v. Deut. 33:1 ["man of God"]. The Bible does call Moses a prophet in a few places (though not many), most explicitly at his death in Deut. 34:10.

²² Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Moses," *passim*.

the prophecy.²³ The life of Josephus' Moses, compiled from exegetical passages, includes all these elements.²⁴

Hellenistic mythology also generally required that the hero be a Platonic philosopher-king, a high priest and a prophet, as well as an orator on a par with Thucydides' Pericles.²⁵ Once again, Josephus' Moses follows suit. According to Josephus, Moses' understanding was superior to his age and when he was taught, he "discovered greater quickness of apprehension than was usual at his age" (II:9:6 [230]). His outstanding behavior as a child promised even greater behavior as an adult; he was taller than average and more beautiful; he exhibited strength and courage in battle (II:10 [238–253]), modesty in

²³ Mythological Greek parallels include Aeschylus' Prometheus trilogy, which tells of an oracle to Danae, the daughter of King Acrisius of Argos, that she would give birth to a son who would kill her father. Attempting to prevent his daughter from becoming pregnant, Acrisius shuts her up in a subterranean vault. Zeus transforms himself into a stream of gold and seduces the girl, who becomes pregnant. After she gives birth, Acrisius locks mother and son (Perseus) in a chest and throws them into the sea. They wash ashore in Seriphos where they are taken in by Dectys, brother of the local king. Years later, Perseus and Acrisius meet at a pentathlon competition; Perseus hurls a quoit, striking his grandfather in the foot and killing him instantly, thus bringing the oracle to fruition. See <<http://www.hsa.brown.edu/~maicar/danae>>. Similar stories are told about Oedipus, Achilles, Paris, Telephanus, and Heracles. In the Roman myth of Romulus and Remus, Amulius deposes his brother Numitor, king of Alba Longa, and then forces his niece Rhea to become a vestal virgin in order to prevent her from giving birth to potential claimants to the throne. However, she becomes impregnated by the god Mars and bears twin sons, Romulus and Remus. Amulius orders the infants thrown into the Tiber River but the trough in which they are placed floats down river instead of sinking. The twins wash ashore and are suckled by a she-wolf until they are found by a herdsman who raises them. They eventually kill Amulius, restore their grandfather to the throne, and go on to found Rome. See <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=86059&tocid=o>>; Feldman, *JQR* 82: 296–7.

²⁴ The organic exegetical connection between the biblical and midrashic accounts of Moses' life has been analyzed in the previous four chapters. I am not arguing against the theory that the similarities between the narratives of Moses and earlier Near Eastern and Greek heroes may have resulted, at least in part, from a midrashic reliance on the earlier mythological material. I do maintain, however, that the midrashists carefully chose and adapted those accounts that answered specific exegetical and homiletical questions. Where the midrashists disagreed with the messages woven into these earlier portrayals or found them extraneous, inapplicable, or exegetically unsound, they rewrote them accordingly or left them out. Josephus utilized these accounts in compiling his history of the Jews, choosing to include and adapt, and in a sense preserve, those midrashic accounts that served his particular polemical purpose. Since Josephus lived in roughly the same period in which the motifs he uses were composed, one could claim that they were composed not only for exegetical reasons but also for the homiletical reasons for which Josephus employs them: defense against the anti-Jewish Hellenistic charges.

²⁵ Feldman, *JQR* 82: 291.

relationship to others, and piety vis-à-vis God. He adjudicated law cases so justly that even those who lost left satisfied that justice had been served. As Feldman writes, “Josephus’ treatment of Moses is a veritable aretalogy such as would have been appreciated by a Roman society that admired the Stoic portrait of the ideal sage.”²⁶

B. *Abraham*

Although Josephus strives to present Abraham as a Platonic philosopher-king as well, on par with Moses, he does *not* relate the same stories about the earlier patriarch. The narrative of Abraham lacks the fundamentals of the biography of the hero common to the heroes of Hellenistic literature, among them Josephus’ Moses. In Josephus’ narrative, Abraham’s existence, especially as a rebel who will overthrow the kingdom, is not foretold; no kings desire his demise at his birth; he leaves his homeland *before* his countrymen have a chance to persecute him; and he does not return victorious, as Hellenistic heroes are wont to do and as Moses does when returning from Midian to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Abraham simply does not return to Chaldea at all. As has been pointed out, the narratives on Abraham’s birth and toddlehood that include all such “heroic” aspects appear in the post-Qur’ānic midrash alone, that literature that was open to influence from Islam and Ibrāhīm. The pre-Islamic Josephus, like the rest of the pre-Islamic midrash, does not include these elements.

Furthermore, Josephus does not portray Abraham and Moses in the same light in terms of predeterminism or free-will. While his portrayal of Moses emphasizes the leader as God’s fated chosen, Josephus’ portrayal of Abraham stresses the forefather’s role and stature as a man of faith and intelligence, free from divine guidance or influence. Unlike Josephus’ Moses who is approached by God, Josephus’ Abraham discovers Him on his own. According to Josephus, Abraham leaves his homeland not because God commanded him to in Gen. 12:1 but because his countrymen had risen up against him on account of his independent monotheistic beliefs, which he had come to through careful astronomical and astrological consideration.²⁷ Abraham goes down to Egypt not only because famine strikes Canaan,

²⁶ Feldman, *Josephus’ Interpretation of the Bible*, 377. Although the society was Roman, their literature was Hellenistic.

²⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities*, I:7:1 (157).

as in Gen. 12:10, but in order to become acquainted with Egyptian science and other esoteric laws and to engage in discussions with Egyptian wise men. In Josephus' mind, Abraham constituted the wise man and sage par excellence for he taught the Egyptians astronomy, the science for which they eventually became famous.²⁸ Although Genesis 13:14–17 records God's promise of the land of Israel to Abraham's descendants as a divine gift, Josephus insists that the land is an inheritance to be won in war, a merited reward.²⁹

It appears that Josephus' opposite characterization of Abraham may have resulted from his desire to answer the very same charges addressed by his Moses narratives, that the Jews produced no great characters or leaders. In Abraham, Josephus once again presents an ancestor on a par with the greatest of Platonic and Stoic sages. However, whereas the Moses narrative refutes the Hellenistic indictment by presenting the accusers with a Jewish leader imbued with divine favor and authority from his very beginning, the Abraham narrative rebuts the charge through an aggrandizement of the forefather's own active character. Indeed, the depiction of the founder of monotheism as a man of blind faith would not have been favorable to Josephus' polytheist Hellenistic audience.³⁰ As such, Josephus diminishes the role of miracles and of God precisely in order to exaggerate Abraham's own role as a romantic hero.³¹ Like Moses, Josephus' Abraham displays the virtues required of a Hellenistic hero: wisdom, temperance, justice, courage, and piety. In contrast to Moses, however, Abraham's heroic status and connection to God stemmed from his strength of character and independent intellect rather than from a pre-established relationship with the Divine. Although his life and personality

²⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, I:8:2 (167–168).

²⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, I:10:3 (183–185).

³⁰ Louis Feldman, "Hellenization in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*: The Portrait of Abraham," in *Josephus, Judaism and Christianity*, eds. Louis Feldman and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 146–7.

³¹ Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Bible*, 249. As in the case of Moses, it seems unlikely that Josephus is the original source of the midrashic narratives on Abraham but repeated what was known in learned Jewish circles of the day. The *Book of Jubilees* (135–96 BCE), which predates Josephus by a century, similarly depicts Abraham's birth and childhood as wholly normal human events. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* (2nd century CE), almost coterminous with him, does not even mention Abraham's birth. Instead, the narrative of Abraham's life begins with the forefather contemplating the falsity of idol-worship. See above, Chapter Two, for further discussion of these texts. Josephus' role in these narratives seems more compiler/redactor, one who had a particular axe to grind and so chose his material carefully, than author.

differ from Moses', Josephus' Abraham nonetheless sends the same message: Judaism did produce and the Jews did descend from heroes and great men.

The particular choice of Moses over Abraham as the figure Josephus elected to most closely reflect the biography of the Hellenistic hero should not surprise readers of the Bible. As giver of the laws and details of the Israelite religion, Moses, not Abraham, ranks as the specifically *Israelite* leader. Abraham, founder of monotheism in general and progenitor of Semitic groups other than the Jews, constitutes a more universal forefather.³² In fact, Ben-Zion Wacholder notes that during the Judeo-Greek literary period "all of Jewish history became popularly telescoped in the figure of Moses."³³ In writing a narrative of a Jewish figure whose biography contained the same heroic elements as non-Jewish Hellenistic heroes, Josephus thus logically chose the more "Jewish" of the two men—Moses.³⁴

³² Josephus himself emphasized this more universal aspect of Abraham's personality: Josephus was among the first to disseminate the idea that the "modern" Arabs descended from twelve tribes born to Abraham from his Egyptian wife. He supports this contention by asserting that, like their Jewish cousins, the Arab adherence to male circumcision derived from their affiliation with Abraham. See *Antiquities*, I:12:2 (214). Josephus' claim seems to be based on either a popular etiology or intentional creativity but not on the Bible. In Gen. 16:1, Abraham takes Sarah's Egyptian maid servant, Hagar, as his second wife. The Bible credits her with giving birth only once, to Ishmael, who becomes the father of the "Ishmaelites." In Gen. 25:1–6, after Sarah's death Abraham takes to wife Keturah, a woman of unnamed lineage and affiliation. She gives birth to twelve children, all of whom the text names, and none of whom are identified, here or elsewhere, as fathering a people called "Arabs." The "Arabs" appear as a separate and unrelated group of people first mentioned in Isaiah 13:20, "Nevermore shall it (Babylon) be settled, nor dwelt in through all the ages. No Arab shall pitch his tent there, no shepherds make flocks lie down there." Fergus Millar notes that Josephus nonetheless identifies the caravan of Ishmaelites in Gen. 37:25 as a caravan of "Arabs." Josephus, he states, combined Abraham's two wives and their offspring into one unit, making the Egyptian woman the mother of 12 sons, one of whom fathers the Arabs. See Millar, "Hagar, Ishmael, Josephus, and the Origins of Islam," *JJS* 44 (1993): 23–45.

³³ Ben-Zion Wacholder, *Euipolemus: A Study of Judeo-Greek Literature* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1974), 96.

³⁴ Other Hellenistic Jewish writers seem to have employed the same tactic as Josephus. Scholars have noted that Moses occupies a much more exalted position in the literature of the Alexandrian Jews, who lived in the midst of Hellenistic culture, than he does in Palestinian literature. See Moses Hadas, *Hellenistic Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 172.

III. *The Independence of Abraham through the Generations*

Unlike the early midrashic depiction of Moses recorded in Josephus, Abraham thus represents the alternate ideal of individual responsibility and free-will. In the words of one scholar, the midrashic Abraham constitutes the model convert who chooses God of his own volition.³⁵ In this he stands as a great example for his descendants who are charged with similarly disentangling themselves from the idolaters around them and willfully and purposefully following God and His Torah instead. Abraham thus represents the living model of the maxim of Hillel the Elder (30 BCE–20 CE), who lived slightly before Josephus. In a place where there are no men of integrity, taught Hillel, a Jew must strive to be such a man.³⁶

This message persists as the central thrust of the Abraham narratives even as the accounts shift and expand to accommodate new details and motifs. Although the post-Qur’ānic midrashic reports on Abraham’s early life adopt motifs from the Ibrāhīm saga, the midrashic sources do not allow the wrong message, one which champions fate and destiny instead, to shine through. This remains the case regardless of the fact that these motifs were themselves adapted from the earlier pre-Islamic midrashic Moses saga. Despite the predeterminedism of both the midrashic Moses and the Islamic Ibrāhīm, the post-Qur’ānic Abraham retains the independent bent established in his pre-Islamic incarnation and so crucial to the midrashic message he carries to the generations.

IV. *Ibrāhīm and Muhammad*

Having established that the pre-Islamic characters of Abraham and Moses represent two purposefully distinct entities with intentionally different messages, a question arises about the Islamic portrayal of Ibrāhīm. As demonstrated in the preceding chapters, many of the details of the Ibrāhīm narratives trace back to the pre-Islamic midrashic accounts of Moses, or to accounts associated with him. But, we must

³⁵ Haim Leshem, “Avraham vi-Yitro: Gerim Rishonim,” *Mahanaim* 92 (1964): 76–84.

³⁶ “במקום שאין אנשים השחרל להווות איש,” (*be-maqom she-ayn anashim hishtadel li-hiyot ish*). *Mishna*, ed. R. Pinhas Kehati (Jerusalem: Heikhal Shelomo, 1992), *Avot* 2:6. The Mishna was closed in the 2nd century CE.

ask, *why* do the Islamic texts consistently model Ibrāhīm after Moses when there already exist midrashic accounts of Abraham, Ibrāhīm’s midrashic doppelgänger? Why the invariable insistence on Ibrāhīm’s predestined status, like that of Moses, in the face of Abraham’s independence? Is this a case of Islam misunderstanding Jewish narratives on the forefathers, “confusing” Abraham with Moses, Nimrod with Pharaoh, Amram with Azar, and Yochebed with Emetlai?³⁷

In reality, the answer to this conundrum has very little to do with the figures of Ibrāhīm, Abraham, or Moses. Rather, there is another principle at work in the Islamic narratives of the forefather, one with an agenda and homiletic messages that do not concern him as an individual. The true focus of all these narratives concerns a much later prophetic figure, likewise chosen by Allah to fulfill His divine mission and employed as His supreme and final messenger. By this we mean none other than the Apostle of Allah, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdallāh of the tribe of Quraysh. Succinctly put, Ibrāhīm’s biography resembles that of Moses because the biography of Muḥammad, the prophet of Islam, resembles that of Moses.

A. *The Story of Muḥammad’s Life*

An analysis of the early life of Muḥammad will elucidate this claim. Like the life of Moses and later of Ibrāhīm, Muḥammad’s life includes an annunciation, removal from his natal home, adoption by another family, miracles associated with surrogate nursing, and guidance by Allah to His path. Moreover, like both Moses and Ibrāhīm, the traditional Muḥammad does little to earn his place in Allah’s affections. Rather, much to his own surprise, he is chosen for his role by an inscrutable divine will, the same divine will that had earlier chosen

³⁷ All too often, we find this as the explanation for the differences between midrashic and Islamic accounts on “Israelite” characters. Muslims, either the *muḥaddithūn*, *qusṭāṣ*, or even Muḥammad and his Companions, are said to have misunderstood what they had heard from their Jewish or Judeo-Christian sources or to have confused accounts, people, places and times. One example of this, quoted often in this study, is Sidersky’s *Les Origines*. This tendency has been noted by earlier scholars as well. See Steven M. Wasserstrom’s *Between Muslim and Jew*, 171–2. Maxime Rodinson provides an overview of such sources in his “A Critical Survey of Modern Studies on Muḥammad,” in *Studies on Islam*, ed. and trans. Merlin L. Swartz (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 23–86. While there may have been confusion and unintentional conflation of the earlier materials, one must recognize that often there are intentional exegetical and homiletical factors at work in the Islamic “manipulation” of the Jewish data.

both the father of the Semites and the prophet of the Israelites to be His emissaries.

The lion's share of the material on Muhammad's life will be drawn from the biography of Muhammad (*sīra*) as presented by Ibn Ishāq (d. 768 CE) according to the recension of his student Ibn Hishām.³⁸ Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra* constitutes the earliest and most complete biography of Muhammad that has survived to the present. *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* of al-Ṭabarī and *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* of Ibn Kathīr³⁹ will supplement Ibn Hishām.⁴⁰

1. Annunciation

Many types of annunciation accounts run through the narrative of Muhammad's young life. During his childhood, seers look over his body and foretell his greatness.⁴¹ During his young adulthood, monks prophesy about him as he goes about his business or sits to eat under a tree.⁴² Significant for the matter at hand, among these many episodes are those that tell of prophecies accompanying Muhammad's birth. These accounts bear a striking resemblance to the earlier narratives told about the midrashic Moses and his subsequent literary derivatives, Mūsā and Ibrāhīm.⁴³

³⁸ In Wüstenfeld, ed., *Kitāb Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*. This will be cited as "Ibn Hishām." Ibn Hishām's date of death has been calculated as either 827 or 833 CE.

³⁹ Abū al-Fidā' Ismā'il ibn Kathīr (1301–1373), *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* (Beirut: Maktabat al-ma'ārif, 1990).

⁴⁰ The biographical compilation of the similarly early al-Wāqidi (747 or 8–823 CE), which does *not* include accounts of Muhammad's birth, emigration, or death, and which has its own particular perspective on Muhammad's life in general, will not be utilized. See Rizwi S. Faizer, "Muhammad and the Medianian Jews: A Comparison of the Texts of Ibn Ishāq's *Kitāb Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* with al-Wāqidi's *Kitāb al-Maghāzi*," *IJMES* 28 (1996): 463–489.

⁴¹ In Ibn Hishām, 107, Ḥalīma reports that a group of Abyssinian Christians in Mecca studied Muhammad and, detecting his future greatness, requested to take him home with them. Later, Abū Ṭālib brings Muhammad to the seer of Lihb to have his fortune told. After looking at him, the seer declared that the child should be given over to him because of his great future (114–115).

⁴² Ibn Hishām, 115–116. See also al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh*, 2:277 (1/1124–26).

⁴³ References to the character known in midrashic texts as Moses and in Islamic text as Mūsā will appear as "Moses/Mūsā" in the following pages. The earlier midrashic and the subsequent Islamic narratives relevant to the current argument differ little in ways that are significant to the thesis involved. The point is to show the similarities between Muhammad's biography and that of Moses, similarities that would have been recognized by the Islamic community as well. It is necessary therefore to refer to this particular character in both his midrashic and Islamic incarnations. When the narratives differ, it will be so noted. On Jesus' birth and its role in the midrashic Moses narrative, see above Chapter One, pp. 81–85.

Before we begin, we should note one interesting difference that manifests itself in the Muslim prophet's sibyllic case. Whereas the annunciation of the biblical forefathers came to the pagan king whom the newborn would overthrow, a significant portion of the sibylline prophecies of Muhammad take place among an already monotheist group, the Medinian Jews.⁴⁴ Like the Egyptians in Egypt and the Babylonians in Chaldea, the Jews were a powerful force in pre-Muhammadan Medina.⁴⁵ One might even say they ruled this very significant and important city, which Muhammad and the Muslims later came to govern. The message of the texts thus remains the same in all three cases: just as Moses/Mūsā and his followers and as Ibrāhīm and his followers would prove victorious over those who had foretold their coming, so too Muhammad and his *umma* would vanquish those who predicted his arrival.⁴⁶ Politically and theologically, imply these accounts, Islam would defeat Judaism. Furthermore, placing the annunciation in the mouths of monotheists serves an important role in emphasizing the truth of the message. After all, whose prophecies are more believable to monotheists, those of pagans or those of a similarly monotheist group known to have received revelations from God Himself?⁴⁷

⁴⁴ By contrast, the later validations of the sibyllic prophecies never appear to involve the Jews. Their participation in predicting Muhammad is restricted to the sibyllic.

⁴⁵ On the authoritative position of the Jews in Medina both before and after Muhammad's birth, see Lecker, *Muslims, Jews and Pagans: Studies in Early Islamic Medina*, 9ff.; and Moshe Gil, "The Origins of the Jews of Yathrib," *JSAI* 4 (1984): 203–223.

⁴⁶ One can see the intentional parallel drawn between the Jews and Moses'/Mūsā's murderous Egyptians (as well as Ibrāhīm's Chaldeans) more obviously in a tradition cited by al-Mas'ūdī, al-Majlisī, Khargūshī and Ibn Shahrāshūb. They recount that shortly before 'Abdallāh and Āmina conceived Muhammad, seventy Jewish scholars arrived in Mecca from Syria in order to kill the father of the future prophet and thereby prevent Muhammad's emergence, which they had foreseen. They attacked 'Abdallāh, who was still single, and beat him, although they did not succeed in killing him. See Uri Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light: Aspects of the Concept of *Nūr Muhammad*," *IOS* 5 (1975), n. 14. David Cook touches on this subject in the context of the Jews' supposed later envy of and bewitching of Muhammad in his "Muhammad, Labīd al-Yahūdī and the Commentaries to Sūra 113," *JSS* 45:2 (2000): 342–5. Wasserstrom notes evidence of the early Islamic conception of the Jews as the Muslims' enemy in another area; Islamic apocalyptic visions cast the Jews as the ultimate enemy in the last struggles, the wars as the end of time. See Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew*, 56–7. David Cook delves deeply into this phenomenon in his *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* (NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005) and *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, Inc., 2002).

⁴⁷ One cannot ignore the possible historical motives that may also underlie the

In one such account, Ibn Ishāq records that two Jewish rabbis from among the Banū Qurayṣa, descendants of the tribe of Levi, heard that the king (*tubba'*) of Yemen intended to destroy the city of Yathrīb (Medina). They approached the ruler and advised him against such action. If he proceeded according to plan, they warned, he would incur speedy retribution, for Yathrīb was the place to which a prophet of the Quraysh would migrate in the upcoming years. It would become both his resting place and his home. Recognizing the truth of the rabbis' hidden knowledge, the king abandoned his plan, departed, and embraced the rabbis' religion.⁴⁸

‘Āsim ibn ‘Umar ibn Qatāda provides a similar report in which the Jews warn those who would attack Medina of the coming of the soon-to-be prophet. The people of Khazraj in Medina, he relates, often raided the Jews during the period preceding Muḥammad's arrival. Whenever ill feelings arose between the Arabs and the Jews on account of these raids, the Jews would inform the Khazraj that a prophet would arise soon whom they would join. With his help, the Jews would warn, they would defeat the Khazraj. When the townspeople later heard of Muḥammad's approach, the polytheists recognized the fulfillment of their Jewish neighbors' prediction and rushed to convert to Islam before the Jews did.⁴⁹

Other accounts similarly indicate that the Jews knew of Muḥammad's arrival ahead of time and spoke about it with their Arab neighbors. According to Ibn Ishāq, no Arab tribes knew more about the apostle—both when and before his fame was mentioned in Medina—than the Aws and Khazraj. This knowledge resulted from their

accounts of Muḥammad's Jewish annunciation. The time and place into which Muḥammad was born were filled with messianic hopes and expectations on the part of the Jews and other religious groups. It may very well be that the Medinian Jews had been discussing and expecting a messiah of some sort and this narrative was aimed at convincing them that he had arrived and that his name was Muḥammad. On Jewish messianism in the immediate pre- and early Islamic period, see Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew*, 47–92; Uri Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'ān: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image* (Princeton: Darwin Press, Inc., 1999), 11–35; Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1997), 26–31.

⁴⁸ Ibn Hishām, 13–14. In Yūnus ibn Bukayr's (d. 814 or 15 CE) alternate transmission of Ibn Ishāq, he maintains that the two men were an Awsite named Uḥayḥa ibn Julāḥ and a Jew named Benjamin of Qurayza. While Uḥayḥa hailed the king, Benjamin frightened him away with the prophecy of the Qurayshi prophet. See Alfred Guillaume, “New Light on the Life of Muḥammad,” *JSS*, monograph no. 1 (Manchester University Press, n.d.), 11.

⁴⁹ Ibn Hishām, 286–7.

position as neighbors and allies of the Jews, whose rabbis were known to speak often of the coming of Muḥammad well in advance of his arrival in Medina.⁵⁰ ‘Āsim ibn ‘Umar ibn Qatāda added, on the authority of a “shaykh” from the Jewish Banū Qurayza, that a Syrian Jew, Ibn al-Ḥayyabān, moved to Medina from Syria a number of years before Islam. He did so, he said, because he had heard a prophet would soon arrive there and he desired to follow him. Ibn al-Ḥayyabān warned the Banū Qurayza that this new prophet would be sent to shed blood and make captives of the women and children of those who would oppose him.⁵¹ Although he waited in good faith, Ibn al-Ḥayyabān died before Muḥammad’s arrival. Similarly, in Abū Nu‘aym’s *Dalā’il al-nubuwwa*, Abū Mālik ibn Sinān related that a Jew by the name of Yūshu‘ lived in close proximity to the Banū ‘Abd al-Ashḥal. One day, Abū Mālik came to talk to them and heard Yūshu‘ proclaiming, “The time approaches for the coming of a prophet named Ahmād who will arise from the sanctuary!” When Abū Mālik came home and expressed surprise at what Yūshu‘ had been saying, one of his kinsmen commented, “So is it Yūshu‘ who alone says that? All the Jews of Yathrib are saying the same!”⁵² In yet another account, Salama ibn Salāmah ibn Waqsh related that a Jewish neighbor in Medina reported that a prophet would be sent from Mecca in the near future. Two days later, Muḥammad arrived in the city, much to the consternation of the Jews who, out of wickedness, denied him as said prophet.⁵³

Other examples of the Jewish annunciation of Muḥammad are found throughout his biographical ledger. Two further examples can be found in Ibn Kathīr’s *al-Bidāya*. In one (2:266–7), ‘Ā’isha recounts that on the night of Muḥammad’s birth, a Jew who lived and worked in Mecca addressed a gathering of the Quraysh and asked them if a birth had occurred among them that very night. When they answered that they didn’t know, the Jew replied that it behooved them to check, for a prophet was born to them that night, one who bore the sign of prophecy between his shoulders. The men went home to check, found that Āmina had given birth, and brought the Jew to her house to look at the infant. When Āmina revealed the child’s

⁵⁰ Ibn Hishām, 178.

⁵¹ Ibn Hishām, 135–36.

⁵² Cited by Ibn Kathīr in *al-Bidāya*, 2:267.

⁵³ Ibn Hishām, 135.

shoulder mark to the Jew, he fainted dead away. Upon reviving, he exclaimed, “By God, prophecy has left Israel’s tribe!” In another (2:251), a Jewish scholar in Yemen once hosted ‘Abd al-Muṭṭālib, Muḥammad’s grandfather. After checking in his guest’s nostrils, the Jew declared his guest destined for both power and prophecy.⁵⁴ Since he knew the same destiny was true of the Banū Zuhra, the Jew suggested that ‘Abd al-Muṭṭālib marry a woman from that tribe straight-away. So ‘Abd al-Muṭṭālib married Hāla bt. Wahb, who bore him Ḥamza and Ṣafīyya. ‘Abdallāh, his son from a different marriage, married Hāla’s sister Āmina, and she bore him Muḥammad. About this the Quraysh said that ‘Abdallāh defeated his father (“وَلَبَّ عَبْدٌ عَلَى أَبِيهِ,” *wa-ghalaba ‘Abdallāh ‘ala abīhī*, i.e., had the upper hand).

The parallels between Muḥammad’s annunciation and those of the earlier Israelite leaders as depicted in Islam are visible even in those renditions in which the details deviate somewhat from the midrashic Moses. Using the general motif of ‘sibyllic annunciation’ as a springboard, the Islamic sources created a new detail. As we have seen, the Ibrāhīm and Mūsā sources relate that at the time of their births, a star shone in the night sky, indicating the birth of a child who would overthrow the religion of the land.⁵⁵ In Ibn Ishāq’s *Sīra*, Ḥassān ibn Thābit reports a similar event regarding Muḥammad’s birth. One night when he was about 7 or 8 years old and living in Medina, Ḥassān recounts, a Jew climbed to the top of one of the forts of the city and began calling out, on the top of his lungs, “O Jews! Tonight has risen the star under which Ahmād is to be born!”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibn Kathīr does not explain this strange behavior. Perhaps nostril-checking of guests suspected of supernatural aspects was not unusual.

⁵⁵ In the midrashic Moses, Pharaoh receives a prophecy from his advisors but he does not once see a light or a star. See above Chapter One, pp. 73–79. The appearance of Mūsā’s and Ibrāhīm’s star may have been influenced by Matthew’s earlier account of the star that heralds the birth of Jesus, another important monotheistic recipient of Allah’s revelation. See Chapter One, pp. 81–82. Raymond Brown traces the details of Matthean story itself to the Biblical story of Balaam. See Chapter One, n. 92. It seems more likely that Matthew’s star relates to the motif of divine light accompanying the birth of a prophet, an exegetical idea that arises from the biblical text of Moses’ birth, which will be discussed further on.

⁵⁶ Ibn Hishām, 102. According to the Islamic tradition, “Ahmād” is one of the alternate names of Muḥammad. The Qur’ān (61:6) maintains that the Torah itself refers to Muḥammad by this name when it predicts the rise of an Arab prophet who will re-reveal the religion of God and Ibrāhīm, saying “And when ‘Isa, son of Maryam, said: ‘O Children of Israel, I am God’s messenger to you, confirming the Torah which was before me, and announcing the good tidings of the messenger who will come after me, whose name is Ahmād.’” For more on the Muslim

Ibn Kathīr cites a similar account reported by Abū Mālik. Abū Mālik was once visiting the Jewish tribe Banū Qurayṣa and found them in a discussion of the soon-to-come prophet, Muḥammad. Al-Zubayr said, “The red star has risen and it only ever rises on the departure or emergence of a prophet. And the only one left is Ahmad; this (Yathrīb) will be the place to which he will migrate.” Likewise, Zayd ibn Thābit taught that the Jewish rabbis of the Banū Qurayṣa and Banū al-Naḍīr said that when the red star rose it rose for a prophet after whom there would be no other, that his name was Ahmād, and that he would migrate to Yathrīb.⁵⁷ As with the Israelite prophets before him (Ibrāhīm, Mūsā, and Jesus), Muḥammad’s birth was announced by the appearance of a star in the sky.

Another account in which Muḥammad’s biography follows that of Mūsā and Ibrāhīm utilizes the Islamic motif of annunciation through the dream of a king. Both Fir‘awn⁵⁸ and Namrūd,⁵⁹ though neither the pre-Islamic Nimrod nor Pharaoh, dreamed of a fire that came from Bayt al-Maqdis, near the Mediterranean Sea. As it traveled, it devoured the houses in its path. Soothsayers interpreted their royal visions as indicating that a child would be born who would overthrow the kingdom and institute a new faith. Similarly, in the years preceding Muḥammad’s birth the Yemenite king Rabi‘a ibn Naṣr dreamed that a fire came forth *from the sea* and devoured everything it came near. Advisors explained this frightening vision in a fashion similar to the earlier soothsayers: a child will be born who will overthrow the government and institute a new religion. However, the Yemenite interpretation included one interesting deviation from the

claim that the Bible and Jesus predicted the coming of Muhammad/Ahmād, see Lazarus Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, chapters 2 and 4; Percy Smith, “Did Jesus Foretell Ahmād? Origin of the So-Called Prophecy of Jesus Concerning the Coming of Muḥammad,” *Muslim World* 12,1 (1922): 71–4. Schacht rejects Smith’s claim that Ahmād is a translation of the Greek “paraclete” found in John 14:16 and 15:23–7. He suggests instead that the use of “Ahmād” to refer to Muḥammad came into vogue in 740 CE, only after Muḥammad had already been ideologically identified with the paraclete. See *EI²*, s.v. “Ahmād,” by Joseph Schacht (1:267).

According to Ibn Kathīr (*al-Bidāya*, 2:272), in his *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa* Abū Nuṣaym places the appearance of the star in a prophecy told to ‘Abdallāh by a traveling Syrian monk named ‘Ayṣā.

⁵⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 2:267.

⁵⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:388 (1/447); idem, *Jām‘ al-bayān*, 20:27; al-Tha’labī, *Qisāṣ al-anbiyā’*, 201–202; al-Majlisī (d. 1698 CE), *Bihār*, 13:14–15.

⁵⁹ Al-Tha’labī, 86–87; al-Kisā’ī describes this as a smokeless fire descending from heaven which threatened to destroy Namrūd’s palace. In a separate instance he maintains that Ibrāhīm’s mother was the one who saw fire, beginning from under her skirt and spreading throughout the world. See al-Kisā’ī, 129.

Egyptian and Chaldean. Namely, the prophet foretold in Rabi'a's dream would not overthrow Rabi'a himself but a subsequent ruler and his kingdom; Ethiopians would soon take over Rabi'a's country and rule there for approximately 60–70 years. It is *their* rule, say the soothsayers, that would later be overthrown by a pure prophet, as yet unborn, to whom revelation would come from on high and who would bring truth and justice among men of religion and virtue.⁶⁰

It is conceivably not coincidental that the king who receives the prophecy of Muhammad's arrival is not Ethiopian (a member of the nation eventually overthrown by the foretold prophet) but Yemenite (of the nation conquered by the nation overthrown by Muhammad). Islamic historians and traditionalists were well aware of the powerful king, Dhū Nuwās, who ruled over Yemen in the years preceding Muhammad's birth. At some point during his rule, Dhū Nuwās converted both himself and his people to Judaism.⁶¹ Perhaps by placing the prophecy in the mouth of a king whose nation was so closely associated with the Jews, monotheists who tend to foretell Muhammad's arrival, the biographers hoped to provide the account with an added measure of validation. Moreover, once again the prophecy of Muhammad's arrival and success appears among those who will eventually be overtaken by him, just as with Moses/Mūsā and Ibrāhīm.

2. *Surrogate Family, Miraculous Nursing, and Precocious Growth*

The similarities between Muhammad and his prophetic predecessors continue past his birth and into his infancy. As we have seen, Moses/Mūsā and Ibrāhīm were both separated from their mothers and/or their families at birth and raised away from home, Moses/Mūsā in the royal palace and Ibrāhīm in a cave. While separated from their families, the two experienced miracles associated with their surrogate mothers. The infant Moses/Mūsā refused to be suckled by any Egyptian woman, a pagan, and would allow himself to be fed only from the breast of an Israelite.⁶² According to the midrash, other

⁶⁰ Ibn Hishām, 10–12.

⁶¹ See *EI*², s.v. "Dhu Nuwās," by M. R. al-Assouad (2:243–245).

⁶² Josephus, *Antiquities*, II:9:224 (225–227); *BT Sotah* 12b; *Exodus Rabbah*, 1:25. In the Islamic sources, Mūsā suckles only from his Israelite mother, not just any Israelite woman. See Mujāhid (641–722 CE), 1:522–3; Ibn Kathīr, *Qisāṣ al-anbiyā'*, 286; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 1:389 (1/448–9); al-Tha'labī, 205–206; al-Kisā'ī, 281–2. According to Newby, Ibn Ishāq explains that Allah scorched the breasts of the Egyptian wet-nurses assigned to Mūsā so that he would take nothing from them. See Ibn Ishāq (d. 768 CE), in Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, 122.

Israelite infants affected by Pharaoh's murderous decree were miraculously suckled by God through rocks.⁶³ The Islamic tradition transfers this miracle to Mūsā himself; Ibn 'Asākir (2:18–19) relates that Mūsā's mother fed him with the help of a rock. In similar refashions of the midrash's motif, the Muslim exegetes state that when Fir'awn's wife opened the ark in which Mūsā had been placed, she found a young boy, with light between his eyes, for whom Allah had provided sustenance in his fingers. When he sucked on them, they provided him with milk.⁶⁴ Ibrāhīm, as we have seen, also nurses variously from rocks, animals, or even the hand of the angel Jibrīl.⁶⁵

Despite the odd food sources, or perhaps due to them, Moses/Mūsā, his Israelite compatriots, and Ibrāhīm all undergo precocious maturation, growing years in a matter of weeks and months. This allows them to return to their homes without arousing the suspicion of the governments searching for infants rather than for older children. *BT Sotah* 11b reports that God watched over the Israelite boys in the fields in which their mothers had left them until they were big enough to return home without arousing Egyptian suspicion. R. Judah, in *BT Sotah* 12b, maintains that when Pharaoh's daughter found Moses in his ark, she found a young child crying with the voice of an older boy.⁶⁶ Josephus writes that God gave Moses "tallness" so that when he was but a three year old child, he towered over the other three year olds as a much older child would.⁶⁷ Al-Majlisī reports a similar observation made of Mūsā's stature by Āsiya, Fir'awn's wife. Fir'awn wished to execute Mūsā because he suspected Mūsā of being the child destined to overthrow him. Āsiya rushed to Mūsā's defense claiming that he was far too big a child to have been born as recently

⁶³ See Chapter Three.

⁶⁴ Al-Tha'labī, 205. The *isnād* reads: Ishāq ibn Bishr—Juwaybīr and Muqātil—al-Dahhāk—Ibn 'Abbās.

⁶⁵ An analysis of Ibrāhīm's and Moses' miraculous feeding appears above in Chapter Three.

⁶⁶ R. Judah bases himself on Exodus 2:6 where Scripture uses two different words to describe Moses. Throughout this pericope, Moses is referred to as **תֵּלֶד** (*yeled*), a little boy. Suddenly, when Pharaoh's daughter opens up the ark, he is described as a youth, an older child. Translated literally, the verse reads, "She saw him, the little boy (*ha-yeled*), and behold, [it was] a youth (**נֶעֶר**, *na'ar*) crying." One could understand the verse as indicating that although Moses was a small child in age, Pharaoh's daughter saw a somewhat older figure, a youth. Perhaps this verse served as the basis for Josephus' and al-Majlisī's narratives, below.

⁶⁷ *Antiquities*, I:9:6 (230–231). This idea reappears in *Exodus Rabbah* 1:26. *Exodus Rabbah* 1:27 offers another version: Moses grew to be 10 *amot* tall.

as required by the prophecy.⁶⁸ Stressing a similar sentiment, al-Kisā'ī records that the infant Mūsā spoke to his mother and sister in full and philosophical sentences when he was but a few hours old.⁶⁹

Muhammad too is removed from his biological family as an infant and placed with a surrogate family where he experiences miracles associated with his nursing. According to Ibn Ishāq, when Muhammad was an infant, he was given over to Ḥalīma, of the Banū Sa‘d, to be nursed and raised for a few years. ‘Abdallāh ibn Ja‘far ibn Abī Ṭālib explains: at that time there was a great drought among the inhabitants of the land in which the Banū Sa‘d dwelled and so the families set out for Mecca looking for foster-sons to take in and thus earn money with which to buy food. So great was the drought that neither Ḥalīma, who was at that time nursing her biological son, nor her she-camel was able to bring forth milk. Ḥalīma’s donkey was so weak that it lagged far behind the rest of the tribe. When the tribe reached Mecca, the women began their search for foster children; each rejected the infant Muhammad because he was an orphan and they worried that there was no father to pay them for their services. Unable to find any other child to foster-parent and embarrassed to return to the tribe empty-handed, Ḥalīma finally took Muhammad into her charge. As soon as he was placed in her bosom, she who had been completely dry before began overflowing with milk. Her output was so great that not only did Muhammad drink his fill, but so did his foster-brother, and the two fell asleep satiated. Al-Ḥārith, Ḥalīma’s husband, then went out to milk the usually dry she-camel and, lo and behold, she too was full of milk! Al-Ḥārith and Ḥalīma drank until they were sated and the family passed their first happy night in quite a while. When the tribe set out for home the next morning, Ḥalīma’s donkey ran so fast that the rest of tribe could not keep up with her. This was the same animal which just one day earlier had been so weakened and emaciated that she lagged far behind the rest of the tribe. The miracles affected the family’s flocks as well; Ḥalīma and al-Ḥārith would send their animals out to graze and they would return with full udders while other people’s

⁶⁸ Bihār, 14:16. Al-Tabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 1:394 (1/455), insinuates the same of Mūsā when he reports that “Allah made Mūsā grow up a strong child and preserved him for what He had predestined him.” Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 CE) describes Mūsā as curly haired and very tall, perhaps a reference to the precocious growth motif. See his *Kitāb al-ma‘ārif*, 20. See above, n. 66.

⁶⁹ Al-Kisā'ī, 202, citing Ibn ‘Abbās.

animals, grazing in the very same spot, would return dry and empty.⁷⁰

We find even the motif of children finding nourishment in their own fingers in the Muḥammad context. According to ‘Ā’isha, a Meccan Jew informed the Quraysh that a child had just been born to them who would be a prophet, and would wear the mark of prophecy between his shoulders. Additionally, declared the Jew, that prophet would not suckle for two nights in a row because “a spirit will have put his finger in his mouth.” This act, he assured them, will prevent the child from suckling in a normal fashion but will cause the newborn himself no damage whatsoever.⁷¹ Interestingly, the transmitters provide no reason for such angelic intervention in Muḥammad’s feeding.

As in the accounts of Moses/Mūsā and Ibrāhīm, the Islamic accounts of Muḥammad’s childhood likewise refer to a miraculous growth spurt at the beginning of the prophet’s life. Although no reason is given for Muḥammad’s spectacular rate of maturation—he is not being persecuted and does not need to avoid detection—his biography offers the detail nonetheless. In detailing her account of Muḥammad’s childhood, Ḥalīma reports that her adopted son grew “as none of the other children grew.” By the time he was only two years old, Muḥammad was already a “well-made child” (عَلِمَ يَلْغُ سَنَتِيهِ حَتَّى كَانَ غَلَامًا جَفِرًا).⁷² Al-Ṭabarī, in the name of Ibn Iṣhāq, says that by the time Muḥammad was two years old, he was a well formed child “beyond the age of suckling.”⁷³ Since two years of age does not normally constitute “beyond the age of suckling” in pre-modern societies,⁷⁴ the statement indicates

⁷⁰ Ibn Hishām, 103–105. In addition to citing this version of events, al-Ṭabarī cites an additional account attributed to Ibn Iṣhāq (Ibn Ḥumayd—Salāma—Ibn Iṣhāq) in which ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Muḥammad’s grandfather, goes searching for a foster-mother and not vice versa. See *Ta’rīkh*, 2:157–8 (1/969). Al-Ṭabarī cites yet another account, this time from Barra bt. Abī Tujza‘a, who maintains that the first person to suckle Muḥammad was not Ḥalīma but a woman named Thuwayba, the mother of Masrūḥ. She suckled him for a few days only, until Ḥalīma came forward.

⁷¹ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 1:267.

⁷² Ibn Hishām, 105. Thus translates Guillaume in *The Life of Muhammad*, Wüstenfeld no. 105. According to Hava, the word جَفِرٌ derives from the first form verb of the root جَفَرَ (jfr), meaning “to grow up.” See J. G. Hava, ed., *Arabic-English Dictionary*, New ed. (Beirut: Catholic Press, 1915), s.v. جَفِرٌ (p. 92). Interestingly, as in the case of Moses in Exodus 2:6, Ibn Hishām uses the word for youth, غَلَامٌ (ghulām), rather than the more age-appropriate ولد (walad), to describe Muḥammad’s appearance. See above, n. 66.

⁷³ *Ta’rīkh*, 2:159–160 (1/972).

⁷⁴ In a discussion of weaning in *BT Ketubbot* 60a (6th century CE), R. Joshua

that Muhammad looked considerably older than his actual age. In the eyes of Islam, Muḥammad, no less than Ibrāhīm or Moses/Mūsā, constitutes God's chosen messenger on earth. Therefore, he too experiences the divine growth spurt common to true prophets, despite his having no practical need for one.

3. *Knowledge of God*

The common aspects of the biographies of Ibrāhīm, Moses/Mūsā, and Muḥammad concern not only the prophets' physical experiences, but also their spiritual development. Earlier we saw that Ibrāhīm comes to know Allah only after Allah first reveals Himself to His servant.⁷⁵ The biblical Moses similarly expresses little awareness of God before God reveals Himself at the burning bush (Exodus 2–3). In fact, Moses admits that he is caught so unawares by the encounter that he does not know even the name of the being with whom he is conversing (3:13). The midrashic Moses does not deviate from this depiction. Josephus' portrayal of the Israelite leader gives no indication that the Israelite child raised among the polytheistic pagan Egyptians experienced a "discovery" of the monotheistic Lord (I:12). Instead, Josephus' Moses first encounters God at the burning bush where God Himself makes the first move and speaks to Moses first. In other words, before Moses can investigate and consider the matter at all, God reveals His existence and presence.⁷⁶ The biographies of Mūsā too, like those of his midrashic counterpart, give no indication

maintains that a child may legally be breast-fed until the age of four or five. In his translation of and commentary on Isaac's weaning in Gen. 21:8 ("And the child grew and was weaned"), E. A. Speiser writes, "To this day, weaning may take place in the Near East as late as at three years or more." See his *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible Series (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1964), 155. More relevantly, Avner Giladi points out that the Qur'ān (46:15 and 2:233) and Qur'ānic exegesis speaks of children nursing until at least 2 years of age. The popular Arab custom of weaning children at the older age of five is reflected in a *fatwa* of Ibn Taymiyya. See Giladi, *Infants, Parents and Wet-Nurses: Medieval Islamic Views on Breastfeeding and Their Social Implications* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), 19–20, 62–63.

⁷⁵ See above, Chapter Two.

⁷⁶ R. Joshua ben Nehemia ha-Cohen (fl. 320–350 CE) relates that when God first revealed Himself to Moses, Moses was so unprepared for the experience, such a novice in the affairs of theology, that God was afraid of alarming him. Therefore, He revealed Himself using the more comforting voice of Moses' father Amram. Hearing Amram's voice emanate from the burning bush, Moses assumed his own father was talking to him from inside; he did not realize it had to be the voice of God. The motivation for this interpretation appears to be the wording of Ex. 3:6,

of any knowledge or discovery of Allah before He suddenly revealed Himself at the burning bush.

Muhammad similarly arrives at an awareness of Allah through Allah's careful and intentional guidance of him rather than through independent discovery. From as far back as his childhood, Muhammad's disassociation from heathenism derived not from his own intentional realization of its falsity but from Allah's command and maneuvering. According to Ibn Ishāq, "the apostle of Allah grew up, Allah protecting him and keeping him from the vileness of heathenism because He wished to honor him with apostleship."⁷⁷ Muhammad became known as trustworthy among his people because of the good qualities which "Allah had implanted in him."⁷⁸ Muhammad himself related one example of the way in which Allah actively protected him from participating in heathen practices. As a child, he once engaged in carrying stones with the Qurayshi boys. At some point, the boys removed their garments and tied them around their necks, perhaps to avoid dirtying them. Suddenly, an unseen figure slapped Muhammad painfully and ordered him alone to put his clothes back on.⁷⁹ Walking around naked was unacceptable for Allah's chosen, it seems, even those who do not yet know they are chosen. Allah therefore led Muhammad to the straight and narrow. Similarly, Ibn Sa'd (d. 845 CE) records that Muhammad told his family that every time he approached an idol, a tall person in white would appear and would call out to him, "Hold back, Muhammad! Do not touch it (the idol)!"⁸⁰ Al-Tabarī records another variation on this idea. He relates that one night when Muhammad was a youth, he asked a

"He [God] said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." No where else in Scripture does the phrase "the God of your father" (in the singular) appear before the enumeration of the forefathers. See *Exodus Rabbah* (c. 10th century CE) 3:1, 45:5 and the 5th century CE *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber edition), 16.

⁷⁷ Ibn Hishām, 117.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibn Hishām, 117, and Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 2:287. Ibn Kathīr (ibid.) quotes Ibn 'Abbās' version which locates the event at the Qurayshi building of the Ka'ba. According to Ibn 'Abbās, he and Muhammad had taken off their shirts to carry rocks to the building site when Muhammad suddenly fell on his face, then sat up and stared up to heaven. When he got up, he put on his shirt and explained, "I was forbidden from walking uncovered."

⁸⁰ For other accounts, see Uri Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1995), 81. Rubin notes another account in which Muhammad leaves idolatry on his own, without external help. He rejects it as a non-canonical idea for a number of reasons, one of which is that this verison appears in no *muṣannaf* collections.

friend to watch his sheep while he went into Mecca to spend the night as young men are wont to do in the big city. In town, he came upon a house in which a pagan wedding had just taken place and he sat down to watch. Allah smote his ear and caused him to fall asleep, thus preventing him from participating even indirectly in the inappropriate pagan merriment.⁸¹ Perhaps even more famously, Muḥammad reported that when he was a child living with his foster-family, he was approached by two mysterious men dressed in white. They threw him down on the floor, opened his belly, extracted his heart and split it. They then removed from it a black spot and washed his heart and belly with snow until it was clean.⁸² This operation is said to have cleansed Muḥammad’s heart from any sin and installed in him *īsma*, an inability to commit any wrongdoing, including and especially pagan worship.

Divine protection, however, was not enough to prevent Muḥammad completely from succumbing to the religion of his surroundings. Once again Muḥammad has to be steered straight and guided to the path of Allah. ‘Ubayd ibn ‘Umayr ibn Qatāda related that as an adult, Muḥammad would retire to Mt. Ḥirā for a month every year in observance of *tahannūth*, “as was the custom of the Quraysh in heathen days.” Explains Ibn Ishāq, “*tahannūth* is religious devotion.” While he was thus engaged in a heathen practice, Jibrīl suddenly appeared to Muḥammad to bring him, almost force him, into the service of Allah. “Read!”⁸³ Jibrīl commanded after approaching the

⁸¹ *Ta’rīkh*, 2:279–280 (1/1127); Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 2:287, cites this account and calls it “a very strange tradition.”

⁸² According to the report of Thawr ibn Yazīd in Ibn Hishām, 105–107.

⁸³ Alfred Guillaume translates the verb إِقْرَأْ (‘iqra’) as “Read!” which fits the current circumstances in that Muḥammad is here presented with writing. See Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 106. In a private email communication, Fred Donner has suggested the alternative translation, “Read out loud” or “Recite.” Both phrases fit the traditional Muslim understanding of Muḥammad as illiterate, a claim supported by the fact that although Muḥammad is presented with writing, he continues to ask what he should read. When Muḥammad finally does obey the angel’s command, it is only after the angel first recites to him what he should “read” (Q 96:1–5) and he repeats it, a recitation rather than an actual reading. This scenario recalls a similar exchange in the biblical book of Isaiah. In chapter 40, the prophet Isaiah records what becomes perhaps the quintessential biblical prophecy of God’s comforting Israel and promise of the end of suffering (“נַהֲמָה עַמִּי,” *nahamu, nahamu ‘ami*, “Comfort, o comfort my people”). Isaiah reports (40:6), “A voice rings out: ‘Proclaim (קֹרֵא, *qera’*)! Another asks (lit. ‘and he said’): ‘What shall I proclaim

sleeping Muḥammad with a brocade coverlet on which there was writing. Four times total did the angel command Muḥammad to read, each time squeezing him so tightly he “thought it was death.” At the fourth command, Muḥammad answered, as he did the previous times, “What then shall I read?” This he did, says Muḥammad, only to deliver himself from Jibrīl, lest he do the same to him again.⁸⁴ One should note that the night on which this first contact between Muḥammad and Allah, initiated by Allah, took place is known as *laylat al-qadar*, the Night of Destiny. Such an appellation indicates that Muḥammad was fated to receive the revelation. He did not come to it on his own; instead, it was his destiny.

Muḥammad’s unfamiliarity with Allah and His ways led him to disbelieve initially that he had been visited by the angel Jibrīl. Instead, Muḥammad thought himself to have suddenly turned into a poet or a madman.⁸⁵ Convinced of his ill-luck, he climbed a mountain in order to throw himself off. On Muḥammad’s way up, Jibrīl appeared to him again and said, “O Muḥammad! You are the apostle of God and I am Jibrīl!” This revelation rooted Muḥammad to his spot where he remained for hours, until messengers sent by Khadija arrived in search of him. When he reached home, Muḥammad, still not completely convinced he had spoken with an angel of Allah, reported to Khadija that he feared he had become a poet or insane. Khadija went to visit her cousin Waraqā ibn Nawfal, “a Christian familiar with the Torah and the Gospel,” and explained the matter to him. Waraqā confirmed both her suspicions and Jibrīl’s words: Muḥammad is neither madman nor poet but a bona fide prophet of Allah, having been visited by the same *nāmūs* (paraclete, intercessor) who visited Mūsā.⁸⁶ Like Mūsā, Muḥammad had been pulled away from his heathen background and pushed into service of Allah.

(﴿إِنَّمَا مَنْزَلَةُ الْمُرْسَلِينَ﴾, *ma eqra?*)⁸⁴ The verses then recited by the voice speak of the futility and smallness of man as compared with his Creator Who is magnificent and powerful, a message similar in content to that of Muḥammad’s first revelation in Q 96.

⁸⁴ Ibn Hishām, 152–153.

⁸⁵ Both poetry and madness were attributed to some sort of extra-corporeal inspiration. The poet in pre-Islamic Arabic society was considered a storehouse of magical knowledge. The content, vocabulary, and cadence of the poet’s creations were directed toward enchantment, a state that has much in common with madness. See *EI*², s.v. “Shā’ir” by T. Fahd. (9:224ff).

⁸⁶ Ibn Hishām, 153–4. The *nāmūs* who appears to both Mūsā and Muḥammad is often understood to be Jibrīl. See in *EI*², s.v. “Nāmūs” by M. Plessner (7:953–55).

4. *Nature Confirms the Prophet's Status*

One of the signs of a truly prophetic character as exemplified in both Moses/Mūsā and Ibrāhīm consists of the natural world's recognition of that status. The animal kingdom bends itself to Moses/Mūsā's commands in a number of instances; wooden rods morph into fully viable snakes, and animal plagues, ranging from an overabundance of frogs to an unbearable lice epidemic, torture the Egyptians on his say-so. The midrash reports further that some animals, the frogs, were so interested in furthering the divine mission as carried out by Moses, that they voluntarily threw themselves into the ovens of the Egyptians in order to ruin them.⁸⁷ In the case of Ibrāhīm, a number of episodes likewise demonstrate the forefather's reputation in the animal kingdom. Wild beasts protected Ibrāhīm, lined his eyes with kohl, and suckled him while he was in his natal cave.⁸⁸ Much later, beasts of burden called into service to bring wood to the pyre on which Ibrāhīm was to burn refused to perform at their usual level of efficiency; cognizant of the ramifications of their actions, they slowed down their productivity appreciably in an attempt to foil the plans of the humans to burn him.⁸⁹ Even the small frog recognized Ibrāhīm's special status, much as it did Moses/Mūsā's. When Ibrāhīm was thrown into the Chaldean fiery furnace, the frog approached the fire and blew on it in an attempt to put it out and thus save his life.⁹⁰

Not surprisingly, nature recognized Muhammad's special prophetic status as well. According to al-Wāqidī, as quoted in Ibn Kathīr, Ibn 'Abbās related that once, when Muhammad was a child, his foster mother went out looking for him and found their animals sleeping in the sun, with Muhammad sitting next to his foster-sister. Why are you sitting here in this heat, she asked the girl. His sister explained what had happened. My brother, she said, does not get hot; I saw a cloud shading him from the heat. When he moved, she explained, it moved and when he stopped, it stopped; that's how we got to this spot.⁹¹ Nature's recognition of Muhammad continued into his adulthood as well. 'Abd al-Mālik ibn 'Ubaydallah ibn Abī Šufyān ibn al-'Alā' ibn Jāriyya the Thaqafite reported from a "certain scholar" that

⁸⁷ See Chapter Three.

⁸⁸ Newby, 68. As mentioned in Chapter Three, p. 143.

⁸⁹ See Chapter Four, pp. 178–179, and n. 5.

⁹⁰ See Chapter Four, pp. 177–179.

⁹¹ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 2:275.

Muhammad used to travel far afield from Mecca. When the time came during which Allah wished to “bestow his grace upon him and endow Muhammad with prophecy,” extraordinary things began to occur to Muhammad during his travels. As he was walking through the fields, all the stones and trees which he would pass would call out to him, “Peace be upon you, O apostle of Allah!” Unaware of what was happening, Muhammad would turn around to try and locate the speaker of these words but never did he see anyone or anything save the stones and trees.⁹² Like Moses’/Mūsā’s animals in Egypt and Ibrāhīm’s amphibians in Chaldea, nature in Arabia recognized and confirmed Muhammad’s special status as Allah’s servant.

5. *Light at Birth/Conception*

An additional element likewise links the three prophets together, one which has not been heretofore discussed. As we have already seen in the narratives above, the appearance of a light of some sort, either in a dream or in actual time, precedes and prefigures the births of each of our three prophets in the Islamic accounts. Light appears in the lives of our heroes in another capacity as well, as an otherworldly trait organic to the very body of the prophet, the physical manifestation of the close personal relationship with the Divine. In the case of Muhammad, this divine light becomes encoded in his DNA. Ibn Hishām records that ‘Abdallāh, Muhammad’s future father, once passed by the sister of Waraqā ibn Nawfal as she was standing near the Ka‘ba. The woman noticed a divine light shining from ‘Abdallāh’s face and immediately offered herself to him. She had heard from her Christian brother, Waraqā, who studied the Scriptures, that a prophet would arise from these people⁹³ and that light signified him and his arrival. She desired to possess such a light herself, to be the mother of such a man. The busy ‘Abdallāh, however, could not stop for a tryst.⁹⁴ He continued on his way to the house of Wahb ibn ‘Abd Manāf of the Banū Zuhra where he married Āmina bt. Wahb and immediately consummated the marriage, impregnating Āmina that day. As soon as she conceived, the light passed from

⁹² Ibn Hishām, 152–153.

⁹³ Al-Ṭabarī, quoting Ibn Isḥāq, writes that Waraqā had found that the prophet was to arise from the children of Ismā‘il. *Ta’rīkh*, 2:243–4 (1/1078–1080).

⁹⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, ibid., explains that ‘Abdallāh was in the midst of accompanying his father either on an errand or a mission.

‘Abdallāh’s face to Āmina’s womb. Meeting up later with a now de-illuminated ‘Abdallāh, Waraqa’s sister found herself no longer interested in him as ‘Abdallāh’s light had apparently relocated to his wife’s body.⁹⁵ Indeed, Āmina later reported that when she became pregnant with Muḥammad, she saw a light come forth from her by which she could see the castles of Busra in Syria.⁹⁶

The Divine Light manifested itself also in Muḥammad’s external appearance. According to Ibn Shahrāshūb, when Ḥalīma first took Muḥammad into her arms, he opened his eyes and they beamed, filled with light.⁹⁷ Other traditions maintain that light appeared and filled the room as Muḥammad was being born.⁹⁸ In one such report, the mother of ‘Uthmān ibn Abī al-‘Āṣ recounted that she was present as Āmina was giving birth to Muḥammad. As she was laboring, Āmina turned to the gathered women and asked, “What is that thing that I can see from the house, lighting everything up?” The light was so bright, Āmina said, she thought the stars were falling in on her.⁹⁹

Not surprisingly, these narratives recall earlier rabbinic accounts of Moses and the light that accompanied his birth. According to Exodus 2:1, when the daughter of Levi gave birth to her son, “she looked and saw that he was good (כִּי טוֹב, *ki tov*).” This phrase raised the eyebrows of the rabbis. After all, what mother looks upon her newborn and thinks he is bad? Additionally, why does Scripture employ

⁹⁵ Ibn Hishām, 100–102. Ibn Kathīr (*al-Bidāya*, 2:262–3) includes the same account but provides the woman with a name: Raqīqa, Umm Qattāl. Yūnus ibn Bukayr’s version calls her Umm Qibāl (Guillaume, “New Light,” 19). Ibn Hishām’s Ibn Ishāq includes an alternate version of events as told to him by his father. In this version the “other” woman is just that, another wife of ‘Abdallāh. He had originally wanted to spend the evening with her but she refused since he was covered with dirt, having just come from work. After ‘Abdallāh washed up, she invited him in but now it was his turn to refuse. He went to Āmina instead and she promptly conceived Muḥammad. On his return, ‘Abdallāh offered himself to the other woman again but she refused, saying that the light that had been blazing between his eyes was now gone and she was no longer interested. See p. 101.

⁹⁶ Ibn Hishām, 102. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 2:156 (1/968) maintains this was not an actual vision but a dream. Ibn Kathīr (*al-Bidāya*, 2:264) explains that she had a vision of the light when she became pregnant with him and actually saw the light with her own eyes when she gave birth. Yūnus ibn Bukayr, one of Ibn Ishāq’s transmitters, quotes an almost identical version in Bayhaqī’s *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa*. Similar versions appear in other sources as well. See Rubin, “Pre-existence,” 83–86.

⁹⁷ Rubin, “Pre-existence,” 63.

⁹⁸ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 2:264.

⁹⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 2:157–8 (1/968–9); Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 2:264.

the word “good” instead of the more likely “beautiful”? The sages noted the similarity between this phrase in Exodus and the phrase used in Genesis 1:2 when God created light, “and He looked and saw that it was good (כִּי טוֹב, *ki tov*).” Using the hermeneutic device of *gezeira shava*, argument from analogy), they understood that the similarity in phrases indicated a similarity in physical event. They explained that just as when God created light at the beginning of the world the world filled with light, at the very moment of Moses’ birth, the entire house filled with light.¹⁰⁰

Islamic narratives later record the same of Mūsā. When he was born, relates al-Tha’labī, light shone forth from his eyes, causing the attendant midwife to tremble all over.¹⁰¹ Others place the light slightly later in the narrative. They relate that when the daughter of Fir‘awn opened up the small ark floating on the river, she found a little boy resting inside, with light shining and twinkling from his eyes.¹⁰² Ibn Kathīr states outright that this was the “light of prophecy.”¹⁰³

Similar foreshadowing light appears in the Ibrāhīm birth narratives as well. Ibn Bishr presents the motif as a detail shared by both Ibrāhīm and his later descendant Muḥammad. According to this early Muslim text, Allah gave *nūr al-samāwāt wa-l-ard*, the light of heaven and earth, to Ibrāhīm, ‘Abd al-Muṭṭālib the grandfather of Muḥammad, ‘Abdallāh the father of Muḥammad, and Muḥammad himself. Indeed, according to Ibn Bishr, Muḥammad’s light shines far brighter than his grandfather’s for he inherited directly from Ibrāhīm.¹⁰⁴ Al-Kisā’ī specifies how this light manifested itself. In one instance he relates that Namrūd dreamed of Ibrāhīm. In the vision, Ibrāhīm appeared before Namrūd as a man from whose eyes light shone forth, dressed in white, and who kicked him, saying, “Which would you prefer: to believe in Ibrāhīm’s Lord or to have me shatter your crown [remove you as king]? ”¹⁰⁵ Later, when birth pangs began, he recounts, the angel Jibrīl appeared to Ibrāhīm’s mother

¹⁰⁰ *BT Sotah* 12a.

¹⁰¹ 149–150.

¹⁰² Al-Tha’labī, 205; al-Kisā’ī, 281. An even earlier occasion in which light pours forth from a holy man’s eyes appears in the 2nd century BCE–1st century CE Qumran *I Enoch*. The text relates that when Noah was born his skin was as white as snow and as red as a rose; his hair was as white as wool, and when he opened his eyes “the whole house glowed like the sun.” See *I Enoch*, 106:2.

¹⁰³ *Qisās*, 285.

¹⁰⁴ Ishāq ibn Bishr (d. 821 CE), 165a.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Kisā’ī, 125.

and led her to a Cave of Light which was set up for just such an occasion. In an additional account, al-Kisā’ī describes Ibrāhīm’s light in a manner that parallels more closely Muḥammad’s light. At around the time of Ibrāhīm’s conception, he teaches, Tārakh’s face was lit up. This parallels the light that shone from ‘Abdallāh’s face before he and his wife conceived Muḥammad.¹⁰⁶

V. *The Nature of the Narratives*

A. *Sacred History*

Having established that the narratives of Muḥammad’s early life—those episodes that establish his credentials as a monotheistic prophet—recall much that we have already seen in the lives of both the earlier midrashic Moses and the subsequent Islamic Mūsā and Ibrāhīm, we can now move to understanding Muḥammad’s role in the creation of the Ibrāhīm narratives. This requires that we first understand the precise nature of the Ibrāhīm accounts and what function they serve in the Islamic tradition. On their most basic and obvious level, these accounts form part of the sacred history of the Muslim community, the material that familiarizes Muslims with the lives and times of their religious and genetic forebears. In recounting the narratives of Ibrāhīm, as well as of other ancestors, the Islamic sources provide Muslim readers with a better grasp of their identity, of their biological as well as their spiritual history. Furthermore, as sacred history, these accounts also present readers with an understanding of how Islam and the Muslims developed through the ages into the faith and the religious community they constitute. Moreover, such narratives regarding ancestors who cultivated personal relationships with the deity reaffirm the special connection between the Islamic *umma* and Allah. At the same time, these accounts provide Muslims with models for proper behavior. In this the stories of the prophets, as found in the *qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’* and *ḥadīth*, are little different than and equally as valuable as the historical-sacred material of many religious traditions.

¹⁰⁶ Al-Kisā’ī, 128. Centuries later, this divine light, called *nūr muḥammad*, becomes a potent element of Shi’i literature. See Rubin, “Pre-existence and Light.”

B. *Chain of Prophecy and Legitimation of Muhammad*

A more specifically Islamic objective underlies these narratives as well, one which more directly addresses the question of the specific configuration of the Ibrāhīm narratives vis-à-vis those of Abraham and Moses. This objective concerns the polemical legitimization of the prophethood and prophecy of Muḥammad in the eyes of the Muslims, as well as in the eyes of the neighboring monotheistic communities of Christians and Jews. The main point of *qīṣāṣ* books in general and the *isrā’īliyyāt* material specifically, the sources for the material on Jewish or Christian characters, is to demonstrate the continuity of the chain of prophecy from the first prophet, Adam, down to the last prophet, Muḥammad. In other words, the stories of the earlier prophets are told largely in order to establish a direct link between Muḥammad and all those who served before him in the same capacity.¹⁰⁷ Camilla Adang notes that fairly early in the historiographic period of Islam it became customary to preface historical accounts of Muḥammad’s life with a section discussing his precursors among the Israelite prophets for precisely this reason.¹⁰⁸ Ibn Hishām restructures Ibn Ishāq’s *Sīra*, perhaps the most famous of Muḥammad’s biographies, to convey the same message. According to Guillaume, Ibn Ishāq’s work originally began with *al-Mubtada’*, a section recounting the beginning of the world (Genesis), and moved forward from there. In editing, Ibn Hishām skipped all the intervening pages and began his recension of his teacher’s work with the biography of the prophet and forefather Ibrāhīm.¹⁰⁹

Muslim writers legitimated Muḥammad’s claim to prophecy not only by attaching it to the material on the earlier monotheistic models but also by shaping the details of his life along the same lines.¹¹⁰ As Donner writes, one of the main functions of the *sīra* genre is to present a biography of Muḥammad that would fit into the already existing and revered patterns of the monotheistic prophets.¹¹¹ Newby supports this claim, stating that it is easy to find in the *sīra* literature literary topoi designed to fit Muḥammad into the paradigms of

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Rippin, “Interpreting the Bible through the Qur’ān,” 249–259.

¹⁰⁸ Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible*, 14–15.

¹⁰⁹ According to Guillaume, xviii.

¹¹⁰ Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 21.

¹¹¹ Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 153.

holy men which were current in the eastern Mediterranean at the time.¹¹² After all, in the Islamic conception, all prophets share a common experience in their role as Allah's messengers on earth.¹¹³ Since those prophets who preceded Muḥammad were largely biblical figures, Muḥammad's biographers shaped his life according to biblical models and filled it out with material associated with the Bible, such as the midrash. The emphasis on the commonality of prophetic experience between Muḥammad and the earlier Israelite prophets supports the claim that Muḥammad himself was a prophet. It also demonstrates that all prophets brought the same message, called Islam by the Muslims, thereby validating Muḥammad as the true and final bearer of that message.¹¹⁴ Watt insists that such commonalities were drawn for the specific purpose of converting the Jews and Christians. This polemic insisted that although the Jews and the Christians had received basically the same revelation as the Muslims, they turned away from it at various points. Muḥammad and his followers, however, revived the true and pure religion and the Jews and Christians ought now return to it.¹¹⁵

The episodes narrated above do not constitute the only points of convergence between the biography of Muḥammad and those of earlier prophets. Smaller details continuously link Muḥammad to the line of earlier prophets. A number of these minor elements draw parallels between Muḥammad and the forefather Abraham. For example, perhaps the most definitive of Abraham's actions in the early midrash concerns his destruction of the idols worshipped by his family and people, the crucial moment at which he breaks from his people and their religion to side with God. This is the event that earns him the punishment of the Chaldean fire, from which he is miraculously saved by God's hand. Perhaps because of this, we are not surprised to find that the biographies of Muḥammad relate that he too caused the destruction of his people's idols. One version recounts

¹¹² Gordon Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 114.

¹¹³ Newby expresses this idea in *The Making of the Last Prophet*, 18–19.

¹¹⁴ Newby also mentions this. *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹⁵ W. M. Watt, *Early Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 37–38. Rubin maintains similarly that the Muslims had to sustain the dogma that Muḥammad belonged to the same exclusive chain of prophets in whom the Jews and Christians believed specifically in order to convince them of the truth of his own role and message. See *Eye of the Beholder*, 21.

that on the night Muḥammad was born, idols all over the world fell from their places and shattered. Somewhat predictably, some Islamic sources relate similar iconoclastic behavior on Ibrāhīm’s part; at the moment of his conception, the Ka‘ba fell over and all the idols inside were smashed.¹¹⁶ In similar fashion, al-Majlisī claims that just as Allah showed Ibrāhīm the kingdom of heaven and earth, so too He showed it to Muḥammad.¹¹⁷ Moreover, both Ibrāhīm and Muḥammad are hidden from their enemies by divinely provided veils.¹¹⁸ Additionally, exegetes twice record that Ibrāhīm recited the very formula most closely associated with Muḥammad’s religion, the *shahāda*.¹¹⁹ And, in one very intriguing instance, al-Ṭabarī explains that the Qur’ānic verse describing Ibrāhīm as not praying for his father’s soul because of Azar’s unrepentant idolatry was revealed when Muḥammad prayed for his own non-Muslim mother to be pardoned.¹²⁰

It is not only the biographers and traditionalists who emphasized the link between their prophet and his prophetic forbears. Rather, Muḥammad himself is said to have stressed outright his connection to his monotheistic Israelite precursors.¹²¹ According to a number of sources, Muḥammad informed Ibn ‘Abbās that when Adam descended to earth he (Muḥammad) was in his (Adam’s) loins; he (Muḥammad) was on the ark in Noah’s loins; and, he (Muḥammad) was thrown into the fire in Ibrāhīm’s loins.¹²² In another instance, someone from

¹¹⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 2:266, citing *Hawātīf al-Ǧān*; al-Kisā’ī, 129. See also Rubin, “Pre-existence,” 87.

¹¹⁷ Bihār, 12:18; al-Rāwandi (d. 1178), 2:867.

¹¹⁸ Bihār, 10:32. On the similarity of the enemies, see al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmi’ al-bayān*, 20:138.

¹¹⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ǧāmi’ al-bayān*, 25:63; al-Qummī (c. 940 CE), 2:73. Al-Qummī has Ibrāhīm recite the full phrase, “There is no god but Allah and Muḥammad is the messenger of Allah.” Al-Ṭabarī, quoting Mujāhid, maintains he recited only the first clause. Reports from other *isnāds*, he notes, relate that Ibrāhīm recited the *taxhīd* and the *shahāda*, although whether this is full or partial is unclear. Yet others (*āḥarūn*) record that he simply intoned the name of Islam.

¹²⁰ *Ǧāmi’ al-bayān*, 11:42ff. on 9:114. This tradition is especially strange given that Muḥammad’s parents are generally portrayed as monotheists and Allah’s loyalists, as in the annunciation episodes above.

¹²¹ Likely, many of these statements are later interpolations in an effort to justify and strengthen Muḥammad’s position in Allah’s inner circle.

¹²² Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Suyūtī, and Zurqānī as in Rubin, “Pre-existence,” 73, n. 31. Ibrāhīm’s loins differ from those of Adam and Noah. As with the rest of mankind, Muḥammad’s very existence depended on his being carried in the loins of Adam (the first human) and of Noah (survivor of the flood that wiped out humanity). The same is not true regarding the loins of Ibrāhīm, who was not alone on the planet but was one of a multitude of people. Being carried in Ibrāhīm’s loins is thus more

among the Banū ‘Āmir once questioned Muḥammad’s claim to be Allah’s messenger on the grounds that the prophets of God, it was well known, stemmed only from Banū Isrā’īl; problematically, Muḥammad descended from “a people who worship stone and idols.” Answered Muḥammad, “The beginnings of the claim to my prophethood lie in the fact that I am what my forefather Ibrāhīm prayed for and the good news of my brother ‘Īsa, the son of Maryam.”¹²³ Similarly, during his *isrā’* and *mir’aj*, his night journey to Jerusalem and ascent to heaven, Muḥammad claimed to have found Ibrāhīm, Mūsā, and ‘Īsa assembled with a company of prophets on the Temple Mount and he prayed there together with them.¹²⁴ After meeting Ibrāhīm during the *isrā’*, Muḥammad declared, “I have never seen a man more like myself than Ibrāhīm.”¹²⁵ Geiger points out that Muḥammad appears sometimes to have so confounded himself with Ibrāhīm that, in the middle of reciting speeches ascribed to the latter, Muḥammad “indulges in digressions unsuitable to any but himself,” thus falling from the role of narrator into that of participant-actor.¹²⁶

Although Muḥammad may have declared Ibrāhīm to be his most similar forefather, in actuality it is the midrashic Moses whom he most resembles and herein lies the key to our answering the question posed much earlier. As we have seen, the details of Muḥammad’s early biography resemble that of the earlier Moses, Mūsā, and Ibrāhīm, to a considerable degree; the biographies of all three leaders contain sibyllic prophecy, surrogate families and miraculous nursing, guidance to the Divine by the Divine Himself, confirmation of divine status by nature, and the aura of prophetic light. But the

than merely a biological necessity, especially when we note the particular image cited here: Ibrāhīm thrown into the fire, the most climactic moment of the forefather’s anti-pagan, pro-monotheistic activity. *This* is the specific moment, the image, to which Muḥammad attaches himself. Muḥammad’s statement consciously links himself to Ibrāhīm to emphasize their shared role as ‘chosen monotheist persecuted by pagans for the glory of Allah.’ Support for this reading appears in a variation on Muḥammad’s statement cited in al-Rāwandī, (2:857), “I was with Ibrāhīm when his people lay a snare for him and he was thrown in the fire, and I was with him between the catapult and the fire, which Allah made cool and safe for him.”

¹²³ Ibn Hishām, 106, citing Thawr ibn Yazīd; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 2:161 (1/974) and 2:165 (1/979).

¹²⁴ Ibn Hishām, 263–4. Ibn Iṣhāq relates this narrative twice, one with an *isnād* tracing back to ‘Abdallāh ibn Mas’ūd and another to al-Ḥasan.

¹²⁵ Ibn Hishām, 266 (as quoted by al-Zuhri from Sa’īd al-Muṣayyab) and 270 (according to a tradition of Sa’īd al-Khudrī).

¹²⁶ Geiger, 99.

similarities between Muhammad and Moses/Mūsā extend even further. Most obviously, Moses and Muḥammad play a similar role in their religion's histories and development, a role *not* shared by Ibrāhīm or Abraham. Neither Moses nor Muḥammad can be considered founders of monotheism. According to both Judaism and Islam, this honor belongs to Abraham/Ibrāhīm alone. Moses and Muḥammad serve instead as re-revealers of his earlier message. Additionally, Abraham/Ibrāhīm provided very few, if any, legal components to his new faith. The religion of Abraham, as it is portrayed in both the midrashic and Islamic texts, consists mainly of a repudiation of idolatry and a practically amorphous imperative to remain loyal to God. Moses and Muḥammad, however, provide their followers with written sets of legal dos and don'ts as well as orally derived, and eventually written, legal systems that touch upon every aspect of human existence.¹²⁷ Moreover, Muḥammad and Moses act not only as religious leaders but also as the military champions of their nations. Moses fights a successful battle against Ethiopia,¹²⁸ leads his people in victory out of Egypt, and subsequently vanquishes the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8–15), the Emorites (Deut. 21:21–32), and the kingdom of Bashan (Deut. 21:33–35). At the end of his forty year career, he successfully brings the Israelites to their homeland, the land of Israel, from which the nation had been in exile. Muḥammad too leads his people to victory in numerous battles, a fact that sparked the creation of the genre of literature known as the *maghāzī*. He too has a victory of sorts in Ethiopia (Abyssinia), to which he sends a group of his faithful in order to escape Qurayshi persecution. Ibn Hishām relates a tradition from Ja‘far ibn Muḥammad that after some time, the Abyssinian ruler acknowledged Muḥammad as Allah's apostle.¹²⁹ And, Muḥammad also brings his people back in victory from Medina to Mecca, his home city from which they had originally been exiled. The military campaigns of Abraham, however, connote a different

¹²⁷ The Islamic tradition maintains that Ibrāhīm too left written evidence, known as *suhuf Ibrāhīm* (صحف ابراهيم). No one, however, has ever claimed to have seen it. Rather, it is said to have been incorporated into the text of the Qur'ān. See Q 20:133, 87:18–19, 53:36–7 and al-Tabārī's *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, 24:70–4, 16:236, 30:155–9. Al-Tabārī quotes a tradition in the name of Abū Jald that *suhuf Ibrāhīm* descended to earth on the first night of Ramaḍān, the same month in which the Torah, the *Injīl*, the *Zabūr* (Psalms), and the Qur'ān (30:159) were revealed.

¹²⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, I:10 (238–253).

¹²⁹ Ibn Hishām, 223–224.

situation altogether and do not appear in the Islamic corpus. When Abraham defeated the united force of Shinar, Ellasar, Elam and Goi'im, he did so only in order to rescue his nephew Lot who had been captured in a war they were waging against five other kings (Genesis 14). His war was not one based on religion or land, as those of Moses and Muḥammad were. Indeed, Abraham refuses to take even the normal spoils of war (v. 23–24), to say nothing of conquering a homeland from which he had been exiled.

Not only are both specific and general events shared by the two men, but the implications of these experiences are one and the same. As the texts demonstrate, the pre-Islamic midrash reformulates the biblical Moses, changing him from a figure whose behavior earns him God's attentions into a character predestined by God for a prophetic leadership role. Moses does not earn prophecy but has it thrust upon him in the desert.¹³⁰ So too the Islamic narratives on Muḥammad describe a man foreordained for apostleship by Allah Himself. As with Moses, miraculous occurrences signify the Muslim leader's arrival well before his birth; miracles accompany him in infancy before he is old enough to prove himself worthy; nature recognizes his special status before he himself does; Allah guides him away from pagan practices and teaches him of His existence. Indeed, the very key to Muḥammad's claim to prophecy is that he is *chosen*, even forced, by Allah to be His messenger. Shī'i scholars especially embraced this view, asserting that Muḥammad was created of a primordial prophetic substance and was born with definite prophetic features.¹³¹ This declamation validates not only the messenger of Islam but also the message itself. If Muḥammad constitutes merely the "vessel," the passive receptacle through which Allah's commands reach the rest of humankind, the message itself comes directly from Allah. Such a stance thus allows Muḥammad and the Islamic tradition to defeat any charge of fabrication and falsehood.

¹³⁰ See n. 18 on the later midrashic return to the biblical idea of Moses as a man who earned his status. This perspective was emphasized by the hasidic movement of the 19th century among whom circulated a legend that Moses was evil by nature but became pious by successfully overcoming his sinful side. His struggle and victory earned him kudos on earth as well as in heaven. See Sid Z. Leiman, "R. Israel Lipshutz and the Portrait of Moses Controversy," in *Danzig: Between East and West*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 51–63.

¹³¹ He is said to have inherited these features from his prophetic ancestors. See Rubin, "Pre-existence," 103–104.

VI. *Ibrāhīm v. Abraham*

When we become aware of this fact, that Muḥammad appears to derive certain aspects of his personality and his history from the midrashic Moses in order to legitimize his role as Islam's ultimate prophet, we are better able to understand the affinity between Ibrāhīm and Moses over the more logical partner, Abraham. As we have seen earlier in this chapter and in previous chapters, the pre-Islamic midrashic Abraham represents an altogether different type of prophet than Moses. Abraham's midrashic persona stresses human participation, responsibility, and the possibility of affecting God's decisions. In fact, so strong was this message in the Jewish tradition, that it remained true in Abraham's case despite the input of the Islamic tradition, which maintained the opposite view.

The midrashic Abraham then presents the very antithesis of the concept of the predestined prophet so central to the biography of Muḥammad. However, since he remains the biological forefather of the Arabs—and thus Muḥammad's genetic ancestor—as well as the initial founder of monotheism—and thus Muḥammad's spiritual ancestor—he cannot simply be deleted from Islamic history.¹³² Yet, as his biography stood, devoid of divine predestination, it ran counter to the values of Islam. Textual evidence suggests that in order to have Muḥammad more closely resemble the father of the Semites, the Islamic tradition rewrote Abraham in Moses', and thereby *ipso facto* in Muḥammad's, image. The result was an Ibrāhīm whose early life has little in common with his midrashic partner Abraham. Instead, his biography shares much more with his equally predestined descendant Moses. Together, they provide validation for the much later Messenger of Allah, Muḥammad.

¹³² The Qur'ān itself offers the sense that Islam is the continuation of the religion established by Ibrāhīm. Q 22:78 instructs, "Strive truly in His cause. He has chosen you and imposed no difficulties on you in religion; it is the religion of Ibrāhīm...." Q 42:13 establishes the continuity of the religion of Ibrāhīm through a line of prophets to Muḥammad: "He has established for you the same religion that He enjoined on Noah and which We revealed to you and that He enjoined on Ibrāhīm, Mūsā and ʻIsa, namely that you remain steadfast in the religion and make no divisions in it...." Uri Rubin discusses the importance and diffusion of the "religion of Ibrāhīm" in pre-Islamic Arab and early Islamic society in his "Hanifyya and Ka'ba: An Inquiry into the Pre-Islamic Background of *dīn Ibrāhīm*," *JSAI* 13 (1990): 85–112, esp. n. 68.

Summary

The previous four chapters focused on the changes that occurred to certain motifs in the early biography of the forefather Abraham/ Ibrāhīm as they traveled from Judaism to Islam and then back. As we have seen, these adjustments were caused not by the vagaries of time and the whim of storytellers. Rather, they were intentional adaptations of material, intended to convey specific messages about the forefather in line with the values of each tradition. Thus, while the midrash uses these motifs to portray Abraham as a personality who determines his own fate and chooses God over paganism, Islam employs these same to stress that Ibrāhīm's role, and in a sense his personality, is preprogrammed by Allah.

The current chapter examined the “why” behind the bifurcation of the two traditions on this issue. Although the midrashic corpus recognizes the possibility of the predestined prophet, as is the case with Moses, it refuses to apply this idea to Abraham. The reason for this lies in yet another message embedded in the narrative expansions of Abraham. Namely, in portraying Abraham as a man capable of choosing monotheism despite the pagan surroundings in which he lived, the midrash stresses the greatness of the man. And in so doing, it contradicts an age-old anti-Jewish polemic that insists that the Jews have produced no men of merit and eminence. An additional message comes to the fore as well. In leaving paganism for monotheism, Abraham constitutes the first “convert” to God’s path and as such serves as the model for future converts.¹³³ On the other hand, the midrashic narratives of the foreordained Moses, seen here as a foil for Abraham, extol God’s power over humanity and emphasize the folly of attempting to subvert Him. The early life of the exegetical Abraham, in contrast, transmits a wholly different message. While God does rule the world, humans are not without responsibility and a measure of independence. The narratives of Abraham urge his followers to act as he did, using the faculties with which God

¹³³ Upon converting to Judaism, converts become known as sons or daughters of Abraham and Sarah. In fact, this appellation becomes part of their official Jewish name. The idea of Abraham as the model for those searching for the true God appears in Isaiah 51:1–2 where the prophet quotes God as instructing, “Listen to Me, you who pursue justice, you who seek the Lord: Look to the rock you were hewn from, to the quarry you were dug from. (2) Look back to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who brought you forth.”

armed each and every human, in order to do that which is right and good and to follow God's path.

The Islamic narratives are built upon an entirely different foundational message. Where Abraham's personality transmits the message of free-will and independence, Ibrāhīm's character uses similar accounts to emphasize instead the more Mosaic idea of Allah's supreme and active control of the universe. It also stresses the idea that a prophet, like Ibrāhīm, is one in a class above other mortals, removed from the mass of humanity. Although humans may strive to be like them, non-prophets will nonetheless never attain their level of closeness with the Divinity. Such is for Allah alone to decide, for He is all-powerful and all-knowing and He selects whomever He wants for prophecy. What He has decreed and set in motion, humans cannot fight.

Finally, the consistent Muslim insistence upon Ibrāhīm as predestined exists for yet another reason as well: namely, the legitimization of Muhammad and his prophecy. As the divinely chosen servant of Allah, Muhammad is the perfect man (*الإنسان الكامل*, *al-insān al-kāmil*), the seal of the prophets, elected to his position from before his birth.¹³⁴ Indeed, such is the Islamic understanding of all prophets. Each of them is elected by Allah to his extra-ordinary station. Moreover, as the final prophet of Allah whose words were intended for Jews and Christians as for the pagan Arabs, Muhammad had to fit into the prophetic mold established by those monotheistic prophets who came before him. While such a predetermined depiction matches that of the early midrashic Moses, it clashes with the message embedded in the midrashic texts of Abraham. The Islamic tradition thus reformulated the biography of this original Semitic forefather, creating him in the image of both Moses/Mūsā and Muhammad.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ I do not maintain that Muhammad prophesied as a child or was a full-fledged Muslim while an infant, a charge that is leveled generally by Arthur Jeffrey in "Was Muhammad a Prophet from his Infancy?" *The Moslem World* 20 (1930): 226–234. Rather, Muhammad was destined for his role and thus Allah continuously inserted Himself in his life in order to prepare him for it.

¹³⁵ This claim disagrees strongly with Bernard Heller's assessment in his article, "Mūsā" in *EI²* (7:639). Heller insists that the Abraham-Nimrod legend supplies the Mūsā legend with a number of features. Among them: a) the king, frightened by dreams, persecutes the infants; b) Mūsā is hidden in an oven but the fire becomes cool; c) Fir'awn orders prayers to be offered up to himself as a god and has a tower built; d) Fir'awn shoots an arrow against heaven which returns bloodstained, whereupon he declares he has slain Mūsā's god. We have already seen in Chapter

In other words, Ibrāhīm is constructed to look like his descendant Muḥammad so that it appears as if Muḥammad simply followed in his, Ibrāhīm's, footsteps.

One that (a) enters the Abraham saga from Moses' and not, as Heller would have it, vice versa. Moreover, (d) first appears not in the Abraham context but in *BT Gittin* 56b where Titus stabs the curtain in the Temple and, when his sword exits bloodstained, he declares he has killed the god of the Jews. A more complete treatment of this episode is forthcoming.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

CUANDO EL REY NIMROD

So popular and well loved was the story of Abraham's discovery of God, victory over Nimrod, and escape from the fire that it entered into the corpus of Jewish folk literature in numerous forms. One of the more persistent and popular of these is the Judeo-Spanish (possibly Balkan) folk song, *Cuando el Rey Nimrod*. Although originally the provenance of Sephardi Jews,¹ with the recordings of Israeli Sephardi singers of the 1960's-70's such as Yehoram Gaon, this song has become familiar in Ashkenazi circles as well.

Because of the nature of orally transmitted folk materials, no one uniform rendition of the song exists. In his *Romancero Sefaradi: Romanzas Y Cantes Populares en Judeo-Español*, Moshe Attias records possibly the longest and most complete version.² This rendering reveals the song's context and raison d'être: circumcision ceremonies. According to the Bible in Genesis 17, Abraham was the first person commanded with circumcision. At the age of 99, he unhesitatingly complied with God's decree and circumcised himself, his 13 year old son Ishmael, and all the males of his household. When his son Isaac was born (Genesis 21), Abraham circumcised him at eight days of age, as instructed by God. For ever afterward, Jewish families have followed in Abraham's footsteps, circumcising their sons at 8 days old, even under the harshest of anti-Jewish commands aimed at preventing them from doing so. Circumcision serves as the sign of the covenant and as the covenant itself between the Jews and their God, a sign and covenant established by Abraham (Gen. 17:10–11). Thus, Jews thought it fitting to recite the wondrous history of this relationship at the ceremony of circumcision.

¹ Modern Jewish communities are very generally divided into two major camps, based on geographic origin. Generally speaking, Sephardi Jews trace their ethnic heritage to Muslim countries while Ashkenazi Jews trace their ethnic origins to Christian Europe. Some different traditions, religious practices, folk customs and literature developed among the different communities.

² Moshe Attias, *Romancero Sefaradi: Romanzas Y Cantes Populares en Judeo-Español* (Jerusalem: Instituto Ben-Zewi, 1961), #127.

In his short commentary on this song, Attias maintains that there is “no doubt” that the anonymous author of this song drew its elements from the aggadic accounts preserved in *Sefer ha-Yashar*. As we have seen, *Sefer ha-Yashar*’s rendering of the Abraham narrative contains much material that is not strictly Jewish in origin but derives from the Islamic extra-Scriptural corpus. It is the hybrid Muslim-Jewish version that rose to popularity in the Jewish folk imagination and persists today, even in Ashkenazi circles. Such are the depths of the intertextual Islamic-Jewish relationship.

NOTE: When sung, this *romancero* usually includes a chorus after each stanza. Attias’ version does not include the chorus, nor does he make reference to it. Other transcriptions, however, do preserve it.³ It is as follows:

“Avraham *avinu*, padre querido,
Padre bendicho, luz de Israel.”

“Abraham our father, our beloved father,
Our blessed father, light of Israel.”

Cuando el Rey Nimrod

“Cuando el rey Nimrod al campo salía
miraba en el cielo y en la estrellería
vido luž santa en la judería
qua había de nacer Abraham *abinu*.

Lugo a las cumadres encomendaba
que toda mujer, preñada quedaba
Y si hijo pariere al punto lo mataran
que había de nacer Abraham *abinu*.

La mujer de Térah quedó preñada,
de día en día él le preguntaba
—¿ De qué tenéis la cara tan demudada?
ella ya sabía el bien que tenía.

En fin de mueve mesés parir quiería,
iba caminando por campos y viñas,
a su marido, tal no lo descubría
Topó una *mehara*, ahí lo pariría

³ See, for example, *Mosaic of Jewish Folksong* (NY: Transcontinental Music Publications, 1990), s.v. “Cuando El Rey Nimrod.”

en aquella hora el nacido hablaba:

—Andavos, mi madre, de la *mehara*,
yo ya topo quien m'alechaar,
malak del cielo me acompañara
porque so criado del Dió bendicho.

En fin de veinte días lo fué a vijitar
lo vido d'enfrente, mancebo, saltar
miarndo al cielo y bien atinar
para conocer el Dió de la verdad.

—¿Madre, la mi madre, qué bušcáis aquí?

—Un hijo preciado parí yo aquí,
vine a bušcarlo, si se topa aquí,
si está bivo me consolaré yo.

—¡Madre, la preciada! ¿qué hablas
un hijo preciado, ¿cómo lo dejáis?
a fin de vene días, ¿cómo lo vijitáis?
Yo so vuestro hijo preciado.

Mira la mi madre, que el Dió es uno,
Crió los cielos uno por uno,
Diícilde a Nimrod, que pedríó su tino
Porque no quiere creer en el verdadero.

Lo alcanzó a saber el rey Nimrod esto,
Dijo, que lo traigan aína y presto
antes que *desreinen* a todo el resto,
y dejen a mí y crean en el verdadero.

Ya me lo trujeron con grande *helbón*,
Y el trabó de la silla un buen trabón:

—Dí, *rašah!* ¿Por qué te tienes tú por Dió
y no quieres creer en el verdadero?

—Acendiendo un horno, bien acendido,
echaldo presto que es entendido;
llevaldo con trabucos, que es agudo,
si d'acquí Dió lo escapa, es verdadero.

Echándolo al horno, iba caminando,
con los *malakim* iba pasendo
y todos los leños fruto iban dando;
de aquí conocemos al Dió verdadero.

Grande *žekut* tiene el sinr de Abram
Que por él conocemos al Dió de la verdad,
Grande *žekut* tiene el parido
Que afirma la *mizvá* de Abram *abinu*.

Saludamos agora al sinōr parido,
 Que le sea *besimán tob* este nacido,
 Que Eliahu *hanabí* mos sea aparecido,
 Y daremos loores al verdadero.

Saludemos al *sandaq* y al *mohel*,
 Que por sus *zékut* venga el *goel*
 y que rigma a todo Israel,
 y daremos loores al verdadero.

English Translation

When the king Nimrod went out into the field,
 he looked into the sky and gazed at the stars.
 Over the Jewish quarter he spied a holy light
 {signaling} that Abraham *avinu*⁴ had just been born.

Swiftly he commanded the midwives
 regarding every pregnant wife,
 if she gives birth to a male, he should be killed on the spot
 {because} Abraham *avinu* had just been born.

The wife of Teraḥ had been pregnant,
 and day after day he questioned her:
 “Why has your face become so pale?”
 She was aware of the good that was inside her.

At the end of nine months, she desired to give birth,
 she wandered among the fields and vineyards,
 not revealing anything to her husband.
 She came upon a cave, and there she birthed him.

At that very moment, the newborn spoke
 —Return, my mother, from the cave
 I will find someone to suckle me,
 and a heavenly angel will accompany me,
 for I am a creation of the blessed Lord.

At the end of twenty days, she went to visit
 and saw him from afar, a child jumping,
 looking into the sky and searching
 to understand the God of truth.

—Mother, my mother! What are you doing here?
 —One dear son did I give birth to here
 I came to see if he is here
 If he is still alive, I will be comforted.

⁴ Hebrew, “our father.” The English translation is my own.

—Precious Mother! What are you saying?
 A son as precious as this, how could you have forsaken him
 And have remembered him only after all this time?
 Here I am, your precious son.

See, my mother, that the Lord is one
 He created the heavens, one by one.
 Tell Nimrod that he has lost his senses,
 Because he does not want to believe in the True One.

The matter became known to Nimrod the king,
 He said, “Let him be brought in, quickly and immediately,
 Before they bring down all the rest in rebellion
 And they reject me and recognize the true God.”

With great humiliation he was brought before him
 And he grabbed his chair [throne] strongly:
 —O, tell me, Evil One why do you take yourself for God
 and do not want to believe in the True One?

[Nimrod ordered:]
 “Light the furnace, let it burn strongly,
 Hurry, for he is a man of understanding,
 carry him off in shackles, for his mind is sharp,
 and if the Lord saves him, He is the True One.”

Into the furnace was he thrown, and in it he walked,
 together with the angels he walked around
 And every tree [inside] gave forth its fruit.
 Verily from this, we know the true God.

Great is the merit of Master Abram,
 Because of him do we know the True God.
 And great is the merit of the father of the child,
 for he is fulfilling the *mitzvah* of our father Abram.

To the father of the child we now wish:
 May this infant be a good omen
 That Elijah the prophet will soon appear.

To the True One we give thanks,
 We thank the *sandag*⁵ and the *mohel*⁶
 Because of whose merit the redeemer will come.
 He will redeem all of Israel
 And let us give praise to the True One.

⁵ At a circumcision ceremony, the *sandag* holds the child in his lap during the circumcision. Usually this is the child's grandfather. The position of *sandag*, sometimes translated as 'godfather,' is considered a great honor and earns one a *mitzvah*.

⁶ The trained one who performs the circumcision. For more on circumcision ceremonies, see *EJ*, s.v. "Circumcision," by Editorial Staff (5:570ff.).

APPENDIX B

ISLAMIC PRIMARY SOURCES

[Unless otherwise indicated, the information that appears in the following pages comes either from the editors' introductions to the works or from the *Encyclopedia of Islam* entry on that individual.]

'Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan'ānī. Circa 744–827 CE, Yemenite author of *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-‘azīzīm*. Much of what he relays, he transmitted from men knowledgeable in *isrā'īliyyāt* such as Wahb ibn Munabbih, Ka'b al-Aḥbār, and Ibn Jurayj. Thus, his work includes *isrā'īliyyāt* material as well, although he tends to steer clear of data that contradicts the tenets of Islam or Islamic law and harms the infallibility of prophets. Toward the latter part of his life, he became the leading scholar of Yemen, attracting students from all over the Islamic world.

al-Damīrī, Muḥammad ibn Mūsā. 1341–1405 CE, Cairo native who went from working as a tailor to professional theologian. After studying under a Shāfi'i teacher, al-Damīrī gained great competence in jurisprudence, the science of *hadīth*, Qur'anic exegesis, Arabic philology, and literature. He was a Sufi, celebrated for his ascetic life and for the miracles he performed. His continuing fame derives largely from his work, *Hayāt al-hayātān al-kubra*, a para-zoological encyclopedia filled with scientific data on animals, Muslim folklore, and frequent digressions into other fields, such as the history of Caliphate and others.

al-Dhahabī, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. 1274–1348 or 1352/3, Damascene historian and theologian. During his lifetime, al-Dhahabī was noted by his contemporaries for his proficiency in *hadīth*, canon law, and history. As a post-classical Arab author, he was a compiler, but one whose works display careful composition and constant references to his sources. His greatest work is his *Ta'rijh al-Islām*, an extensive history of Islam beginning with the genealogy of Muhammad and ending in the year 1300–1.

Ibn ‘Asākir, ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥasan. Damascene with a strict Sunnī upbringing, 1105–1176 CE. His most famous work is a history of Damascus/Syria which constitutes mostly a biographical dictionary of anyone who hailed from, lived in, or passed through greater Syria and/or Damascus from the beginning of time to Ibn ‘Asākir’s day. Although not a work of *qīṣāṣ* in form, Ibn ‘Asākir’s work reflects the *qīṣāṣ* tradition of justifying the message and mission of Muḥammad by demonstrating the continuity between the lives and ministries of the earlier prophets in greater Syria and Muḥammad’s life and mission.

Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī. 1372–1449, Egyptian *ḥadīth* scholar, historian, and judge. He remains one of the greatest representatives of Muslim religious scholarship. In addition to lectureships in *ḥadīth*, exegesis and law, Ibn Ḥajar held a number of official positions including the office of mufti, imam in the mosque of al-Azhar and the Mosque of ‘Amr, and Chief Judge of Egypt (and Syria). In addition to works of *ḥadīth*, Ibn Ḥajar composed large biographical dictionaries known for their thoroughness, accuracy and wide-ranging scope. One of these, the *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, deals with the traditionists.

Ibn Hishām. Died c. 827 or 833 CE. Student of Ibn Ishāq and editor of his classical biography of Muḥammad. By Ibn Hishām’s time, *isrā’īliyyāt* material was considered unreliable and so Ibn Hishām edited out of much of what was in his teacher’s original. Ibn Hishām’s edition of Muḥammad’s biography remains the basic and classic work on this subject.

Ibn Ishāq. Classical biographer of Muḥammad, died in Baghdad in 767 CE. Written as a history for the Abbasid court when he was a court tutor, Ibn Ishāq’s biography mixes Jewish aggadah, Arab legend, and Christian martyrology in stressing a universal history. Although he employed *isrā’īliyyāt* in all parts of the work, most appear in the first portion, a recounting of the early history of the world. The reliability of such sources later fell into disrepute. Ibn Ishāq’s work has not been saved and exists today only in shortened and heavily edited form by his student, Ibn Hishām, and in citations of other scholars, most notably al-Ṭabarī.

Ibn Kathīr, Abū al-Fidā’ Ismā‘īl. Famous historian and traditionist of Mamluk Syria, Ibn Kathīr was born in Bosra in 1300 and died in Damascus in 1373 CE. A student of al-Dhahabī [see above] who filled his teacher’s position at his death, Ibn Kathīr eventually filled a professorship in Qur’ānic exegesis at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus. The most important of his works, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, ranks as one of the major historical works of the Mamluk period and forms the basis of later historical works. His other scholarly accomplishments include a Qur’ān exegesis, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘azīm*, and a *qīṣāṣ* work.

Ibn Qutayba, ‘Abdallāh ibn Mūslim. 828–889 CE, Iraqi theologian and literary author. Although little remains known about his career, many, if not all, of his works have survived. *Kitāb al-ma’ārif*, cited here, is an historic manual with encyclopedic appendices on various subjects. In it, Ibn Qutayba quotes frequently from Wahb ibn Munabbih and from what he refers to as “*al-Tawrāh*.”

Ibn Sa‘d, Muḥammad. Born in Basra in 784 and died in Baghdad in 845 CE. As a traditionist, Ibn Sa‘d travelled widely in search of *hadīth* and studied under a great many authors. His fame resulted largely from his monumental *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubra*, a work that provides information on over four thousand individuals, from the beginning of Islam through the author’s time. All of these were involved in transmitting or narrating *hadīth*.

Ishāq ibn Bishr. Died 821 CE, of Bukhara and Baghdad. Although his *Mubtada’ al-dunya wa-qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’* ranks among the earliest of *qīṣāṣ* works to survive, not much is known about Ibn Bishr the man. Among the chief authorities that he cites are Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, Ibn Ishāq, Sa‘īd ibn Abī ‘Arūbah (d. 773 CE), and Juwaibar ibn Sa‘īd (no date available). Ibn al-Nadīm identifies him as among those who wrote biographies and traditions and attributes six books to him; other than *al-Mubtada’*, none have survived.⁷

al-Kisā’ī, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdallāh. Attributed author of a very colorful *Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’* dating to the 11th century CE. The overall

⁷ Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, ed. Gustav Flügel (Leipzig, 1871–72), 94.

impression suggests that al-Kisā'ī relied to a great extent on his memory rather than on written sources. His work appears intended for a popular, not scholarly, audience. In many cases, he adopted stories of Jewish origin which other authors did not know of or accept. Because of his rampant use of Jewish or *isrā'īlī* sources, normative Muslim scholars often look askance at al-Kisā'ī's work. Scholarship on al-Kisā'ī's dating and first name is divided. The prevailing opinion agrees with Eisenberg, the editor of the Arabic text, that the man was named Muḥammad ibn 'Abdallāh and that the text dates to around the 11th century CE, although the earliest manuscript remaining dates to the 13th century.⁸

al-Majlisī, Muḥammad Baqīr. 1627–1698 CE, Twelver Shī'ī jurist, prolific collector of ḥadīth, author, and bibliographer. An active authority in politics, social and judicial matters, at one point al-Majlisī was practically the actual ruler of Iran. His immense *Bihār al-anwār* resulted from his 25 years of collecting and compiling the scattered and forgotten Shī'ī *ḥadīths*.

al-Mas'ūdī, 'Alī ibn al-Husayn. A Muslim historian and author of *Muṛūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādhin al-jawhār* who was born in Baghdad c. 896 CE and died in Egypt c. 956 CE. His interest in non-Islamic peoples led him to travel widely to Persia, Yemen, India, Oman, Tiberias, Jerusalem, Egypt and Syria. While in Tiberias, he befriended the Jewish scholar Abū Kathīr Yaḥyā ibn Zakarīyya, an authority on the Torah which he was then translating.⁹ In Egypt, al-Mas'ūdī befriended the eminent Jewish scholar and head of the Babylonian academies, Sa'adia Gaon. In his own writings, al-Mas'ūdī expresses great admiration for the historian and scholar al-Tabarī and makes liberal use of the latter's work.

⁸ T. Nagel maintains that Eisenberg erred in designating al-Kisā'ī's first name and insists that identity of the Kisā'ī who authored this text remains an enigma. In fact, Nagel suggests that authorship not be attributed to a single hand. See *EF*, “al-Kisā'ī, Ṣāhib Kisā' al-Anbiyā’,” by T. Nagel (5:176).

⁹ In his *Likkute Kadmoniot*, Simḥah Pinsker identifies this Abū Kathīr with the better known Judah ben 'Alān, or Eli, the Tiberian (d. 932), a Karaite grammarian and liturgical poet who served as the head of a talmudic academy in Jerusalem. This same scholar also appears as Eli or 'Ali b. Judah. See S. Pinsker, *Likkute Kadmoniot zur Geschichte des Karaismus und der karäischen Literatur*, (Wein: Adalbert della Torre, 1860) v. 1, p. 5; *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1907), s.v. “Judah ben Eli,” by M. Seligsohn, 3:341–342.

Mujāhid ibn Jabr. One of the *tābī‘ūn* (successors), born in Mecca circa 641 CE under the caliphate of Umar, and died between 720–724 CE. He studied under Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 687 CE) and was proclaimed the most knowledgable in *tafsīr* in his time, authoring a Qur’ān commentary, the *Tafsīr Mujāhid*. Later generations became somewhat wary of his work when scholarship turned to disapproving of data gleaned from Jews and Christians, as Mujāhid is said to have done. Scholars attempting to locate Ibn ‘Abbās’ *tafsīr* have theorized, although never proven, that Mujāhid’s *tafsīr* is really that of his master.¹⁰

Muqātil ibn Sulaymān. Died 767 CE, traditionist and Qur’ānic exegete. His *Tafsīr Muqātil* features a commentary on the entire Qur’ān, emphasizing narrative elaborations over grammatical issues. Scholars consider it likely that Muqātil’s exegesis presents versions of the narratives as told by the early *quṣṣāṣ*. His tendency to trace allusions in the Qur’ān back to the People of the Book earned him very little respect and confidence from later generations.

al-Qummī, Abū al-Hasan ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm. Author of a Qur’ān commentary, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, who hailed originally from Baghdad and died circa 940 CE. According to al-Najāshshī, al-Qummī is considered to be one of the most reliable transmitters of *hadīth*.

al-Rāwandī, Quṭb al-Dīn. Died 1177 CE, Shī‘ite theologian, *shari‘a* expert, exegete, transmitter of *hadīth*, and poet. Al-Rāwandī’s expertise in these fields placed him squarely in the family business; his father and grandfather were said likewise to have been of the *‘ulamā’* (scholarly class). His *al-Kharā’ij wa-l-jarā’ih*, one of a number of works he produced, deals largely with the wonders and miracles of the Qur’ān, of Muḥammad, and of other prophets.

al-Šan‘ānī. See ‘*Abd al-Razzāq al-Šan‘ānī*.

al-Suddī, Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Abd al-Rahmān. Popular preacher in Kufa who died in 744 CE. His fame lay in his “alleged” exegetical expertise, which resulted in his *Tafsīr al-Suddī al-kabīr*. Although he transmitted prophetic *hadīth*, his reputation in this realm is under dispute;

¹⁰ Isaiah Goldfeld, “The Tafsir of Abdullah ibn Abbas,” *Der Islam* 58 (1981): 125–135.

some consider him to have been harmless while others accuse him of outright lies and forgery.

al-Suyūtī, ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jalāl al-Dīn. 1445–1505, Egyptian scholar, biographer, exegete, historian, *hadīth* specialist, and “secular” scientist, currently recognized by scholars as the most prolific author in all of Islamic literature. Even before he reached age 30, al-Suyūtī’s works were sought after throughout the Near East and later in India and even Africa. His scholarly productivity stemmed from his belief that he had a mission to assemble and transmit to future generations their scholarly Islamic inheritance. *Al-Durr al-manthūr bi-l-tafsīr al-ma’thūr* constitutes al-Suyūtī’s main exegetical work, consisting of *hadīth* and the sayings of the first Muslims.

al-Tabarī, Muḥammad ibn Jarīr. Renowned Persian historian and exegete, 838–923 CE. Although a prolific writer who wrote tomes on Islamic legal issues, two of his other works concern us here. His comprehensive classical work of history, *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, traces the history of the world from its creation through al-Tabarī’s own era. He includes the history not only of Islam and the Arabs but of non-Muslim societies as well. His Qur’ān commentary, *Jamī’ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl ay al-Qur’ān*, is considered his outstanding scholarly achievement, still one of the first sources often consulted and cited by scholars today. In both works, al-Tabarī is more concerned with imparting all the information available to him rather than presenting only that which he deems correct. He is also very careful with regards to the chains of transmission, although more so in the exegetical work than in the historical.

al-Tha’labī, Ahmad ibn Muḥammad. Died 1035 CE. Persian author of *Qisāṣ al-anbiyā’ al-musamma ‘arā’is al-majālis*. Al-Tha’labī also wrote a Qur’ān commentary which did not survive to modern times. Both of his works appear to have been well respected by classical Muslim scholars, despite the presence of *isrā’īliyyat* in his *qisāṣ*. The same is not true of the later scholarly attitude toward his work.

‘Umāra ibn Wathīma al-Fārisī. Author of *Kītab bad’ al-khalq wa-qisāṣ al-anbiyā’* who died in his native Egypt in 851 CE. He quotes Wahb ibn Munabbih so frequently that it has been said that he was a distant student of the latter.

Wahb ibn Munnabih. One of the *tabi'ūn* (successors), born in Yemen during the caliphate of Umar, c. 654–55 CE, and died c. 730–735 CE possibly from complications resulting from a flogging in 728 or 732 CE. Wahb was a prolific author, interested in history and legend which he molded into historical tales. He was, however, bypassed by great majority of ranking professional historians of the period. He studied under 'Abdāllah ibn 'Abbās. Like his teacher, Wahb became an authority in the realm of biblical traditions and in his writing appears to have drawn from Jewish and Christian sources, as well as from Persian, pre-Islamic, and early Islamic materials. It is for this reason that he is looked down upon by later Muslim authorities. His personal familiarity with members of the People of the Book may have been the cause for his flogging.

al-Ya'qūbī, Ahmad ibn Abī Ya'qūb. Arab historian and geographer who died in 897 CE. A Shi'ite of the moderate Mūsawīyya, al-Ya'qūbī wrote a history of the world beginning from creation through the year of the work's composition in 872 CE. While his work is very detailed, Ya'qūbī hardly ever mentions his sources.

APPENDIX C

MIDRASHIC PRIMARY SOURCES

[Unless otherwise indicated, the information that appears in the following pages comes either from the works themselves, Strack and Stemberger's *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, or from the *Encyclopedia Judaica* entry on the work or individual.]

Apocalypse of Abraham. Circa 2nd century CE pseudepigraphal work, likely composed in Palestine. Although the Jewish origin of the book can not be doubted, it has been preserved only in an Old Slavonic version of a Greek translation of a presumably Hebrew original. This work ranks as perhaps the last important creation of the Apocalyptic movement.

Babylonian Talmud. Codified in Babylonia, 6th century CE. At its very basic level, the *Babylonian Talmud* constitutes a commentary on and explication of the Mishna, a work which includes the entire religious law formulated until circa 200 CE, as well as interpretations of Scripture and outside non-legal material. Although *BT* is considered to have been closed in the 6th century, the teachings of sages from as early as five centuries earlier are included.

Book of Jubilees. Circa 135 BCE–96 BCE. *Jubilees* purports to be the secret revelation of the angel of the “Divine Presence” to Moses upon his second ascent to Mt. Sinai. The biblical text reflected in this work is not always identical with the Masoretic version. Sometimes the Biblical citations parallel the Septuagint and sometimes the Samaritan Bible, pointing to a non-Pharisee author.

Chronicles of Jerahmeel. Pseudo-historical anthology composed by the copyist Jerahmeel ben Shelomo. Scholarly opinion locates Jerahmeel either in Italy or Spain in the 11th–13th centuries. Some passages of the *Chronicles* appear to have been copied verbatim from the 8th century *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* [see below] and others resemble closely the works of the 1st century CE Pseudo-Philo [see below]. Jerahmeel’s work also exhibits a high level of Islamic influence.

Deuteronomy Rabbah. A homiletical midrash on Deuteronomy, organized according to the weekly Sabbath Torah readings. Scholars have been unable to affix a date more precise than 450–800 CE. However, language and other internal evidence point to a Palestinian place of origin prior to the circulation of the *Babylonian Talmud* in Palestine.

1 Enoch. Circa 2nd century BCE–1st century CE. Although the earliest text that exists today is Slavonic, the original language most likely consisted partially of Aramaic and partially of Hebrew. The internal evidence makes clear that the work originated in Judea and was in use in Qumran before the Christian era.

3 Enoch. A mystical work, also known as the *Hebrew Book of Enoch*. Although the work is *not* the product of one author, it purports to be an account of a journey into heaven composed by the High Priest R. Ishmael ben Elisha. Supposedly, this R. Ishmael is the early second century CE *tanna* associated with the *Mekhilta* [see below]. Although of the priestly class and a probable descendant of a High Priest, R. Ishmael did not actually serve as High Priest himself. Scholars place the final redaction date of *3 Enoch* in the fifth or sixth century CE. A number of the characters “R. Ishmael” meets, particularly the angel Metatron, appear in normative rabbinic midrash as well.

Exodus Rabbah. 8th–10th century CE. Although generally considered to be a homiletical midrash on Exodus, *Exodus Rabbah* is actually composed of two parts of differing natures. The first section constitutes an exegetical midrash on Exodus 1–10 and the second consists of a homiletical midrash on Exodus 12–40. Chapters 1–14 date to the 10th century CE while chapters 15 on date to slightly earlier, around the 9th century CE.

Ezekiel the Tragedian. A “poet of Jewish tragedies” who lived in the first part of the 2nd century CE. Although no direct link has been found, scholarly opinion places Ezekiel in Alexandria. His work, “The *Exagōgē*,” was written in Greek in iambic trimeter. It recounts in tragic drama form the history of the exodus from Egypt, from the events surrounding Moses’ birth through the beginning of the Israelite journey into the wilderness (corresponding to Ex. 15).

Genesis Rabbah. An exegetical midrash on Genesis, combining simple explanations of language and grammar with aggadic interpretations of varying length and complexity, and interwoven with aphorisms and parables. Much of the work is organized as a verse-by-verse commentary, a style that is abandoned after *parashah* (section) 92. Based on analysis of internal evidence, scholars date the final redaction of this work to the first half of the 5th century CE in Palestine.

Genesis Rabbati. See *Midrash Bereishit Rabbati*.

Jerusalem Talmud. Also referred to as the *Palestinian Talmud*, the *Jerusalem Talmud* is the commentary on the Mishna of the Palestinian *amoraim* (rabbis of the early third century CE to 500 CE). The *Jerusalem Talmud* was most likely closed and codified in Tiberias in the first half of the 5th century CE. Like the *Babylonian Talmud*, it includes aggadic material as well as commentary on Scripture amidst the legal material.

Josephus Flavius. 37–100 CE, Hasmonean priest and military general who fought against the Romans. After the fall of the northern Judean city of Gamla, for which he was militarily responsible, he took refuge in Rome and served the Roman court, an act seen by generations as traitorous. Nonetheless, Josephus remains the principal source for the history of the Jews from the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (175–163 BCE) to the fall of Masada in 73 CE. *Antiquities of the Jews*, his longest work, was written primarily for the benefit of the non-Jewish world and traces the history of world from creation to his own time. Through this work, Josephus intended to demonstrate that the Jews derived from a more ancient and noble society than did the Greeks. His work draws heavily from rabbinic sources, the Septuagint, and extra-biblical traditions as well as from the writings of Greek and Roman histories.

Kalonymous ben Kalonymous. 1286 CE–after 1322 CE, author and translator. A native of Provence, Kalonymous pursued his studies in Salonica where he devoted himself to the translation of Arabic works into Hebrew. Among these was the *Iggeret Ba'alei Hayyim*, a translation of the 51st treatise of the Islamic *Encyclopedia of the Sincere Brethren*.

Leviticus Rabbah. A homiletical midrash on the book of Leviticus which shares much material with the exegetical *Genesis Rabbah* [see above]. According to scholars, the language, preference for Palestinian rabbis (mostly of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE), references to Palestinian geography, and legal rulings relevant only in Palestine point to a Palestinian origin and a redaction date of 400–500 CE.

Ma‘aseh Avraham. According to Adolph Jellinek in *Bet ha-Midrash*, this is an abbreviated form of the medieval Judeo-Arabic *Ma‘aseh Avraham Avinu* [see below] and was brought from Cairo by Prof. Tischendorf. Jellinek includes a Hebrew rendering of the text in his work and maintains that the Hebrew derives from a work by the 13th century Saragossan Bahya ben Asher. This, he continues, was in itself probably taken from the 11th century R. Moshe ha-Darshan’s *Midrash Bereishit Rabbati* [see below]. Though Jellinek claims the Judeo-Arabic and the Hebrew correspond to one another, the two do not match up on a number of points and do not, in fact, appear to me to be the same text. Moreover, despite repeated attempts, I could not locate this episode in the published versions of *Bereishit Rabbati*.

Ma‘aseh Avraham Avinu. A medieval narrative belonging to the genre of short biblical episodes retold as fully developed independent short stories. The works in this genre use most or all of the pertinent material in the Bible and in the midrash but reshape it into a coherent independent plot. Often, details are added that are based on nothing more than the author’s imagination. Recent scholarship has concluded that *Ma‘aseh Avraham Avinu* originated as a Muslim text, attributed by Muslims to the 7th century CE Jewish convert to Islam, Ka‘b al-Ahbār. A Hebrew translator, it seems, accepted the Muslim ascription of Jewish authorship and translated the work back into a Jewish language without any inhibitions. *Ma‘aseh Avraham Avinu* was published for the first time in Constantinople in 1580, although it currently can be found in Adolph Jellinek’s collection of medieval midrashim, *Bet ha-Midrash*.

Mekhilta de-Rabi Yishma’el [The Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael]. Verse by verse tannaitic midrash on the book of Exodus that includes both halakhic (legal) and exegetical midrashic material. The *Mekhilta* remains one of the earliest surviving midrashic collections with a final redaction date, according to Strack, of the second half of the

third century CE.¹¹ The attribution to R. Ishmael derives from the fact that the first midrash of the work is cited in the name of the early second century CE R. Ishmael. Despite this, scholars have concluded that R. Ishmael was not himself the author of the work.

Midrash Avraham Avinu. Like *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu* [see above], the late medieval *Midrash Avraham Avinu* presents a narrative expansion of the Biblical account of Abraham, although the latter focuses on his interactions with Nimrod specifically. In his introduction to this text in *Bet ha-Midrash*, Jellinek suggests an amorphous date of somewhere between *Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu* and *Ma'aseh Avraham*. In a Hebrew footnote to the text itself, Jellinek notes that he copied this particular version from a manuscript entitled “*Gematriot le-talmidei R. Yehuda Hasid*,” of R. Judah Hasid Seigel ha-Levi (1660–circa 1700), a Sabbatean preacher in Jerusalem. This manuscript was later mentioned by Hayyim David Joseph Azulai (1724–1806, also known by his acronym, Hida), a prominent Jerusalemitic rabbi and scholar of Spanish descent.

Midrash Bereishit Rabbati. A midrash on Genesis, usually attributed to the 11th century CE Moses ha-Darshan of Narbonne whose original version, according to some scholars, was much longer. *Bereishit Rabbati* cites, indirectly, from the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, particularly the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. Moses ha-Darshan adapted these sources and added his own explanations as he saw fit.

Midrash ha-Gadol. A 13th century CE Yemenite exegetical midrash on the Five Books of Moses authored by David ben Amram Adani. Despite the late date, the work consists mainly of excerpts of older rabbinic texts of the talmudic period. *Midrash ha-Gadol* is celebrated for its accuracy in quoting known sources and in providing material with which scholars have been able to reconstruct formerly lost texts.

Midrash Tanhuma. A 5th century CE homiletical midrash on the entire Pentateuch. *Tanhuma* likely originated in Palestine, although

¹¹ Moshe David Herr offers a date of not earlier than the end of the 4th century CE. See *EJ*, s.v. “Mekhilta of R. Ishmael,” 11:1267–69.

other communities of other countries later contributed to the later development of the textual recensions. It has been ascribed to the Palestinian rabbi and prolific aggadist, Tanḥum bar Abba, who lived in the second half of the 4th century CE. More likely, the name of the work derives not from R. Tanḥum's authorship but from the fact that he is both the first and most frequent source to be quoted. *Tanhuma* is often cited by medieval works.

Midrash Tehillim. A difficult-to-date, aggadic midrash on the book of Psalms, one which lacks uniformity in the methods used in interpreting the Psalms. Most of the material dates to the Talmudic period in Palestine, as early as the 3rd century CE. *Midrash Tehillim* appears to have undergone an extended period of development. Its concluding section dates to the 13th century.¹²

Moshe ha-Darshan. See *Midrash Bereishit Rabbati*.

Numbers Rabbah. Homiletical midrash on the book of Numbers, made up of two distinct parts. Part One, the larger and aggadic component, concerns Numbers 1–7; Part Two presents a homiletic treatment of Numbers 8–36. Scholars have disagreed as to a precise date for the work although most agree with Zunz that *Numbers Rabbah* constitutes a composite work, and is not the product of a single author. Part One appears to carry a date of approximately 11th–12th century, possibly at the hand of Rabbi Moses ha-Darshan of Narbonne [see above, *Midrash Bereishit Rabbati*]. Part Two has been dated to the 9th century, or earlier. The joining together of the two sections seems most likely to have occurred at the beginning of the 13th century.

Perek Shira. Late 2nd–early 3rd century CE anonymous mystical hymn, in which all of creation proclaims the glory of God. Beit-Arié maintains that *Perek Shira* constitutes one of the earliest compositions belonging to the early tannaitic mystical (*heikhalot*) literature. Although strictly speaking a liturgical work and not a midrash, *Perek Shira* nonetheless preserves many tannaitic midrashic ideas and texts and may have been edited into its current form as early as the end of the tannaitic period (ca. 200 CE).

¹² See Strack and Stemberger, pp. 322–3.

Pesiqta Rabbati. A collection of homiletical midrashic sermons on the festivals, dating approximately to the 6th–7th centuries CE in Palestine. The work is a composite, relying on at least five or six earlier works. Similarly, the idea of one individual final redactor has been rejected by scholars in favor of a lengthy development process.

Philo. Jewish philosopher who lived and wrote in Alexandria, Egypt from 20 BCE to 50 CE. A member of one of the noblest Alexandrian Jewish families, Philo had connections with the Herodian dynasty and Roman court. Although his writings indicate that he likely had no knowledge of Hebrew, it is nonetheless clear that he grew up in a household devoted to Jewish faith, tradition, and teachings. He himself relates that he consulted the elders of the Jewish community about aggadic traditions.

Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer (PRE). Perhaps more properly classified as ‘rewritten Bible’ (i.e. a coherent and continuous biblical story), *PRE* displays midrashic traits and material. The name of the work derives from a false attribution of authorship to Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, a *tanna* from the end of the 1st–beginning of the 2nd century CE whose scholarship and House of Study were well known. The work appears to have originated in Palestine of the 8th century CE and refers to the Arab rule, specifically the Umayyad Caliphate whose fall the author anticipates eagerly as a sign of the end of exile. The influence of Islamic society manifests itself in a number of places; for example, *PRE* uses the names Aisha and Fatima as names for the wives of the Biblical Ishmael. At the same time, *PRE* preserves material from much earlier Jewish sources, including both canonical texts as well as the Pseudepigrapha.

Piyute R. Yanai. Palestinian liturgical Hebrew poet and possible authority on religious law. While a close relationship between R. Yanai’s poetry and the older Palestinian midrashic accounts has been established, it remains unclear whether the midrashic ideas and narratives influenced his poetry or whether both derive from a common source. Modern scholars date R. Yanai to the 6th–7th century, although a date of the 4th–5th century might also be possible.

Seder Eliyah Rabbah ve-Seder Eliyahu Zuta. Also known as *Tanna de-bei Eliyahu*. In this work, the stated intention is to urge correct

moral conduct and glorify the study of the law. The work itself claims to have been authored by the Biblical Prophet Elijah. More likely, the work was composed by later multiple authors and not any one specific person. Scholars maintain it most probable that the work was composed circa 600–800 CE.¹³

***Sefer ha-Yashar*.** Anonymous Spanish-Italian work from the 11th–12th century CE. *Sefer ha-Yashar* presents a mixture of biblical history, rabbinic midrash, and medieval legend. The work itself claims to date to Titus' sack of Jerusalem in 70 CE when a Roman soldier broke through the wall of a Jewish home and found a secret room in which an old Jewish man sat reading his books, one of which was *Yashar*. From there, the book traveled with the man (and the soldier) to Seville, and then on to Naples. The work also claims to have been the cause for the writing of the Septuagint. When Ptolemy Philadelphus (285–244 BCE) of Egypt demanded that the Jews send him their Bible for his library in Alexandria, the Jews, not wanting to send a sacred book to an idolater, sent *Sefer ha-Yashar* instead. Impressed by its beauty and wisdom, Ptolemy did not detect the ruse until so informed by his advisors. In an attempt to avoid further trickery, Ptolemy ordered 70 Jewish sages to be secluded in separate rooms to write down the actual Bible for him. Thus, according to *Yashar*, the Septuagint was born.

***Sifre*.** A running exegetical midrash on portions of Numbers and Deuteronomy. Although the Deuteronomic work, used here, is primarily a halakhic (legal) midrash, it contains an equally extensive aggadic portion. In its present form, *Sifre* to both Numbers and Deuteronomy was unknown to both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds. It is likely that the two *Sifres* were arranged and compiled in Palestine. Scholars continue to debate the dating of *Sifre*. Some date the work to no earlier than the end of the 4th century CE.¹⁴ Strack and Stemberger insist on a date of late 3rd century CE.¹⁵

¹³ See Strack and Stemberger, 341.

¹⁴ See *EJ*, s.v. “Sifrei,” by Moshe David Herr, (14:1519).

¹⁵ Pp. 272–3.

Song of Songs Rabbah. An exegetical midrash providing allegorical exegesis for the Song of Songs. Although it carries a redaction date of the middle of approximately 500–640 CE, the work contains material traceable to much earlier days.

Targum Neophyti 1. Galilean Aramaic pre-Christian recension of the Bible dating to the 1st half of the 2nd century CE. Neophyti was the first complete version of a Palestinian targum to have been discovered.

Targum de Qohelet. Galilean Aramaic translation of Ecclesiastes which blends together literal translation with midrashic paraphrase. While most scholars agree that this targum originated in Palestine, the language betrays evidence of having been “corrected” by those with familiarity of Babylonian Aramaic. Internal signs point to a redaction date of before the Arab conquest of Palestine but after the completion of both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, i.e. not later than the 7th century CE.

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. Galilean Jewish Aramaic recension of the Bible, attributed to Jonathan ben Uzziel who lived from the 1st century BCE to the 1st century CE. Although this targum contains early material, it itself dates to no later than the 7th–8th century CE.

Targum Yerushalmi la-Torah. Also known as *Targum Eretz Yisrael*, a Galilean Jewish Aramaic translation of the Bible that uses aggadic material freely in its translation. In addition, this targum contains information on most of the religious teachings of the Talmudic period. Despite the existence of material that is much earlier, a compilation and redaction date of not later than the 7th–8th century CE has been determined. Evidence of familiarity with Islam and the Arabs can be found in the work, such as the use of the names of Muhammad’s wives and daughter for Ishmael’s wives (as in *PRE*, above).

Yose ben Yose ha-Payyetan. Although he is the earliest liturgical poet (*payyetan*) known by name, Yose’s exact dates and biography are not clear. Some have posited that he was an orphan since he bears the name of his own father. Others, noting that he is sometimes referred to as a *kohen* (member of the priestly class) or even

kohen gadol (high priest), have posited that he lived during the Temple period when priests still served. Most probably, he lived in Palestine in the 4th–5th centuries CE. Much of his poetry utilizes midrashic imagery and themes. His “*Azkir Gevurot*,” used here, speaks of Abraham’s discovery of God through his contemplation of the elements.

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